Mrs. Pederson's Niece

ISABEL SUART ROBSON

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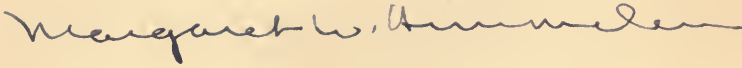

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"She looked at him long and pitifully" (*p.* 166).

Frontis.

MRS. PEDERSON'S NIECE

By

ISABEL SUART ROBSON

Author of
"A Girl Without Ambition"

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INTRODUCTION

Long ago I asked a young American girl what quality she most admired in her girl friends, and her prompt reply was: "Oh, courage! The courage that is never daunted by circumstances and that goes out to meet the disagreeables of life with flags flying and drums beating!" It is in the hope that this friend of my youth voiced the feelings of American girls of to-day, that I send this story of English girlhood across the Atlantic.

Hilary and Frances and Ursula are types of girlhood neither rare nor idealized and nationality has little indeed to do with Hilary's buoyancy and resourcefulness under adverse fortune, or with Ursula's serenity and fixity of purpose, or with Frances Skone's mistaken eagerness for success in the work she has chosen.

For girls of all ages and nations my heart beats warmly; it touches me at all times, to watch them

> "Standing with reluctant feet
> Where the brook and river meet."

I know how they look at the future through a golden haze and that "it beckons them with a thousand fingers promising beautiful possibilities," and I prize more deeply than I can tell every opportunity that comes to me to say a word of inspiration or encouragement. It is my hope that this story of Hilary and her friends will help some girl across the seas to take up with cheerful courage the work which has been given her to do in the world of school or home; not forsaking all other duties in complete self-absorption as Frances did, but like Hilary, who strove after the beautiful example of Pater's Marius the Epicurean, "not to be wanting to the claims of others, in their joys no less than in their calamities."

Life has its difficult and sad sides even for girls as young as my heroine and all the future hinges on the way they learn to face troubles. Hilary's story, and that of those with whom her life was bound up, would have been a strangely different one had she elected to hang the world in black because she had lost much she was girl enough to prize highly.

To me the three girls, part of whose history I have told, are not merely "dream-girls," with whom I have lived happily for months and to whom I must now say "good-bye." Under other names and in somewhat different circumstances

they form part of my own every-day life and it would look empty indeed if they slipped out of it as Hilary, Frances and Ursula must do. If only my readers in America follow the history of the trio with as much interest as the originals have done, I shall have no reason to fear that I have failed to make them live in the pages of my book.

ISABEL SUART ROBSON.

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MRS. PEDERSON'S NIECE.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN CHANGES COME.

"It is the most unexpected and the most annoying thing that could ever happen," said Hilary Pederson, staring out of the window into the wide courtyard, white and still in the afternoon sunshine.

She stood in the middle of Madame Brun's private parlour, with an expression of angry bewilderment on her usually radiant and beautiful face. She was a girl of eighteen, straight and slim as a young palm tree, with blue eyes sparkling with life, and lips which curved readily into a smile.

"Of course, I am sorry for poor Uncle Gervase," she went on, without looking at the old French lady who sat at the table, an open letter in her hand; "but he had no right to arrange my future for me in this fashion."

"The right of those who provide for us,

I suppose," Madame Brun reminded her gently. She was sufficiently in sympathy with her favourite pupil, however, to feel that the girl had some grounds for her protest. It was only natural that she should shrink from leaving the little community of which, for ten years, she had formed an integral and important factor; and, certainly, the late Major Pederson had taken a high-handed and imperious way to gain his own end.

She glanced again at the letter she held in her hand. It was a lawyer's letter announcing his late client's death and that a legacy of ninety pounds a year had been left to Hilary on condition that she made her home with the widowed Mrs. Pederson.

"Nothing would have induced me to make anyone's dependence a handle to force her to do unpleasant things," Hilary said impatiently. "I have been so happy here, dear Madame, that I hate the mere thought of leaving Paris."

The old lady nodded. "It is ten years since your uncle brought you, and never once have we been parted," she said affectionately. "Yes, it will be hard, very hard, to part with you, my little one. Other English girls have come and gone, charming girls, many of them,

but they never stayed long enough to win the heart. You have been to me as my own child."

Hilary Pederson's lips quivered, and she tapped her foot restlessly on the polished floor. She knew that in the Pension Brun she held a unique position. As the oldest resident pupil and the only one who never left its shelter, she had many privileges, and life there had run for her on pleasant lines. She was called now to relinquish all that had made home and happiness during these years, and what was offered her in exchange seemed hopelessly inadequate to compensate her. Every fibre of her being prompted her to say an emphatic "no" to her uncle's dying injunction, whilst common sense told her that she had not a shadow of a reason for refusing to obey it.

"Of course, I must do as Uncle Gervase directs," she said aloud. "It would be different if I knew and cared for Aunt Sophie. But I can't flatter myself that, after forgetting my existence for five years, I have suddenly become dear and desirable to her."

"My dear, we must not judge," said Madame, shaking her head.

"I'm not judging, I'm stating a probability,"

Hilary replied, laughing a little. "Her letter to me is kind enough—a little too effusive, perhaps, but that may be her way. What I want explained is this: if she wants me so inordinately now, why has she never written to me or asked me to visit her before?"

"She was not alone then," Madame put in softly.

Hilary's lip curled. "Did Uncle Gervase strike you as an all-sufficing companion? Stiff, dull, commonplace, that's how I remember him. Altogether English, you know."

"My child, you are English also," Madame replied, laughing, though with a trace of anxiety in her faded eyes. She never saw a fault in her favourite if she could possibly help it, but it jarred on her sense of propriety that the girl should criticise her dead uncle in this frankly disrespectful fashion. It was not surprising, she was bound to confess. He had maintained the girl generously, but he had done nothing, in all the ten years since her parents left her to his care, to win her affection or respect. He had been almost a stranger to her. During her life under Madame Brun's roof he had visited her only some half-dozen times, and then for the briefest space. His wife,

married five years ago, Hilary had never seen, and the first letter the girl received from her was to announce the Major's death.

With every wish to maintain family affection, Madame Brun could not feel surprised that Hilary's liking for her relatives was of the most tepid character. She took comfort, however, in her knowledge of the girl, and told herself that Hilary belonged to that fortunate class who are happy anywhere, and make friends in the most unlikely places.

"You will find Mrs. Pederson companionable enough, I doubt not," she said dully. "I have no fear but that you will find a happy home, chérie. The regret and the blankness will be with those you leave behind you."

Hilary threw back her head with a quick, impatient gesture.

"If you keep harping on that string I shall do something desperate, dear Madame," she said, with a catch in her clear voice. "I can keep up my own spirits, but I can't keep up yours too. Let us put the whole tiresome business away for awhile. You know we were discussing our next holiday excursion when this odious letter came. We are going to do the Hartz Mountains this time."

"We shall have to give up the Hartz, Hilary."

"Dear Madame, how preposterous! Surely there is not the least necessity to pile that disappointment on the mountain of my woes. A few weeks more or less cannot overwhelm Mrs. Pederson with grief. It will surely be soon enough if I go to England when the holidays are over and the girls return."

Madame Brun shook her head.

"My child, I shrink from sending you from me a moment sooner than necessary, but there are things to be considered before personal feelings. Miss Smith, our second English mistress, starts for London on the day after to-morrow, and you must travel with her. It will be a great relief to me not to be obliged to commit you to the care of strangers."

Hilary laughed. Miss Smith was barely two-and-twenty, and though she was a Girton graduate she did not appear to Hilary as a very imposing custodian of English maidenhood.

"I might be a crate of valuable china or a maniac," she cried, shrugging her shoulders. "It is fortunate that I look young for my age, or fellow travellers would have a difficulty in discerning which was the chaperone and which

the chaperoned. Honestly, dear Madame, don't you think I might be trusted to make the journey alone when we come back from the Hartz? I hate to give up the excursion, the very last we shall have together, and I really feel as capable of finding my way as Miss Smith can do."

"My dear Hilary, I desire that you travel with Miss Smith," Madame said firmly. "A schoolgirl never travels alone. It has never been thought right for her to do so"—an argument which has been considered conclusive since the days of Job. "I must find Miss Smith at once and make arrangements for your journey."

The old lady left the room, and Hilary soon followed her, taking her way slowly up the uncarpeted staircase to the little white room which had been hers so long. It had never seemed so dear and desirable as now, when it was so soon to have another tenant.

The prospect of Miss Smith's company was not an exhilarating one. She was the one person Hilary had ever found it difficult "to get on with," and the relations between them had been, to say the least, strained. Hours of her society and her undiluted conversation presented no attractions. There was scarcely a subject

upon which they held the same views, and Hilary failed altogether to reach Miss Smith's standard of girlish excellence.

It was Miss Smith's conviction that the passing of examinations and the taking of degrees was the only business of a girl's life worth pursuing. Every day she thanked the goodness and the grace which on her birth had smiled and caused her to be born in an enlightened age which endowed colleges and opened the doors of learned professions to women. Hilary's Gallio-like spirit towards these privileges was incomprehensible to her, though she openly affirmed, and with acerbity, that the atmosphere of the Pension was not conducive to scholastic ambitions.

She had made strenuous efforts to imbue Hilary with desires for a Girton course, and pointed out the gain of a degree should she ever be thrown on her own resources for a livelihood. The girl was too happy with Madame Brun, and too young and careless to fear the future. She turned only a laughing ear to the English mistress' predictions; whilst Uncle Gervase was willing to keep her at the Pension Brun, she desired nothing better.

And now Circumstance, often cruel and always arbitrary, was sending her away.

Hilary went to the window and threw it open. The afternoon was warm and sunshiny, with a fragrance of spring in the air. She leaned her elbows on the sill and looked out thoughtfully. The school was situated in a retired part of Paris, and high walls enclosed the large house and its gardens. Nothing of the outside world was to be seen; it might have been the cloister of a convent, so absolutely was its busy hive of girls guarded from every contact with the great city.

Hilary's little room was on the second floor, and from its window she could see the lilac and laburnum nodding in the light spring breeze, and the golden and brown of wallflowers in the borders. Delicate green, the colour of hope, met her eyes wherever they turned.

She was by nature bright and buoyant, and as she stood looking out on the new life in the old garden, some of her vague dread of an untried future slipped from her. Why should the world, which had shown her so smiling a face hitherto, be less kind in the days to come?

She knew nothing of Mrs. Pederson, but why should that depress her? She had never

known anyone yet who did not mean her well and in whom she could not feel interest in some degree. Even poor Miss Smith had her good points and her hours when she was quite a pleasant companion. She found herself speculating, as she watched the little girls at play in the garden, as to what "Aunt Sophie" was like; but such speculations were soon merged in the prospect of a life removed from school discipline, a life without rules, and which now to Hilary seemed a life of uneven and ragged edges. She had been used for so long to have her days set in a frame that she was not sure that she should like its removal.

After all, as Madame Brun said, it was largely in her own hands to make her life, in the days to come, "worth while," and she was resolved that it should not be empty or purposeless. It must be a difficult sphere which did not promise some pleasures and compensations for all she was leaving.

When the tea bell rang, Hilary went downstairs gaily humming a little French song. Madame Brun noted a new expression in the frank young face and smothered a sigh.

The regret and the sorrow would be for those to whom Hilary was saying good-bye, for

though she might feel the wrench of parting, already the future was beckoning her, promising a thousand things the Pension never could give her.

CHAPTER II.

FRANCES.

It was a chill, grey afternoon when Hilary reached London. Spring, after promising beautiful things, seemed to have repented and withdrawn her warmth and colour. It was altogether an inauspicious day on which to make acquaintance with one's native land.

Miss Smith had parted with her charge at Herne Hill, where her own journey ended. Long before she reached Hilary's age she had gone to and fro in the earth without let or hindrance and come to no harm. She therefore frankly disavowed any concurrence in Madame Brun's apprehensions, and when the girl assured her that she would be met at the terminus, left her to finish the journey alone without any compunction.

Hilary said good-bye to her with more regret than she would have thought possible twenty-four hours earlier. She watched her uncompromising deerstalker-hat and neat coat disappear in the crowd of alighting passengers

with a sudden sense of chill and limpness. For the first time in her life, she was alone in the big, bustling world, where everyone was absorbed in his or her own business and had no thought or attention to give to the solitary schoolgirl.

The train started again, and a quarter of an hour later she was on the platform of Holborn Viaduct Station.

She had written to Mrs. Pederson mentioning the hour of her arrival, and it had been her comfortable conviction that she would find her aunt awaiting her. It was manifest that she had over-estimated Mrs. Pederson's eagerness to see her. Porters were hurrying, shouting, threatening to bear down upon the unwary with trucks piled high with luggage; women with harassed faces and children clinging to their skirts wandered about aimlessly, whilst news-boys bawled the latest intelligence in untranslatable Cockney. There was no one on the crowded platform whom Hilary could by the greatest effort of the imagination mistake for her aunt.

She waited a few minutes, then went to claim her luggage, directed it to be put upon a cab, and set out to find Markham Square.

This could scarcely be called a propitious opening of her new life, and it was fortunate that she was not one of those whom circumstances easily depress. She looked out of the cab window, nevertheless, with a sinking heart. All the morning's sunshine had been left behind in Kent, and there was a menace of rain in the grey, sullen sky which accorded well, she thought, with the dinginess of the streets and the tired, absorbed faces of the passers-by.

Her spirits rose as the cab turned into Markham Square. It was dull and monotonous, but there was an air of comfort and respectability about the tall, well-kept houses. Here and there a brightly painted exterior or a freshly filled window-box made a welcome splash of colour, whilst, in the square garden, glimpses of lilac and laburnum could be seen.

"If No. 10 has window-boxes I shall conclude that life is going to be pleasant there," Hilary said to herself, laughing. "I believe in signs and tokens.'

(Later, she came reluctantly to acknowledge that, under Mrs. Pederson's administration, even window-boxes may be an abomination and the caring for them a wearying of the flesh.)

Her knock brought to the door an elderly

maid, who regarded her with stolid but quite friendly curiosity.

"My mistress is out, miss, but as you are expected it is all right," she said affably. "If you will please walk into the drawing-room, the second door on the right, I'll help the man with your boxes."

Hilary followed these directions and found herself in a large room, gaudily papered, and furnished in the walnut and green rep style of the 'sixties, tastelessly supplemented with imitation Chippendale chairs and Japanese fans. She looked about her with undisguised amusement, and then became suddenly aware that she was not sole monarch of all she surveyed. Her right was disputed by a rather untidy-looking girl who was standing at one of the windows, staring out into the sooty square of garden behind the house.

At the sound of Hilary's step she turned and looked at her with a long, full stare. She was a small and very thin girl of four or five-and-twenty, with black eyes more critical than kindly. There was an expression of strain and overwork on the small white face, whilst the low brow with its disproportionate cranial development gave her, at a first glance,

the appearance of a precocious child. She wore a gown of some dark stiff stuff which hung in ungraceful folds about her thin figure.

"You are Hilary Pederson, of course," she said coolly; "I am Frances Kemsing. Mother told me she expected you to-day, so I thought I would come round. I knew it was as likely as not that she would not be here to receive you. She is a law unto herself in most matters where other people are governed by convention."

"Indeed," murmured Hilary, somewhat taken aback by this odd reception and no less by Miss Kemsing's announcement of their relationship. Uncle Gervase had not thought it worth while to mention that in marrying he had gained a daughter as well as a wife. "You are very kind to be here to meet me."

Miss Kemsing laughed drily.

"I don't suppose I should have come if I had not happened to have a free afternoon. I have not the reputation for doing odd kindnesses, I assure you. As we're likely to see something of one another, I may as well tell you that I'm a medical student and devoted heart and soul to my work. I allow nothing to stand in the way of my work; I leave

the little acts of kindness, little deeds of love, to those who have nothing else to do."

Hilary laughed. "I'm sure you make yourself out more tiresome than you really are," she said, with decision. She had been studying the dark, clever face, and decided that she liked it, in spite of its expression of gloom and acerbity.

"Do you know, Frances—I may call you Frances, may I not, since we are almost cousins?—I did not know of your existence until this afternoon."

Frances smiled. "I guessed that from your mystified air when I introduced myself. I am not surprised that the Major did not mention my existence. I was the thorn in his cushion, and he only compassed repose by forgetting me altogether. He disapproved of my choice of a profession, root and branch. When he and mother married he offered me a home on condition that I gave up the hospital altogether."

Hilary nodded. "He seems to have been fond of making conditions."

Frances looked at her sharply, but there was nothing but good-tempered interest in her story on the frank, sunny face of her companion.

"It did not take me long to decide that I could not give up all I had been working for. Why, I would rather live in a garret than abjure my profession. I've roomed with another student ever since, and it has been the best thing in the world for all of us."

"I wish you lived here, though," Hilary said warmly. "It was jolly to find that I had a cousin, but you will not be much use if you are miles away."

Frances leaned back in her chair and clasped her thin fingers behind her close-cropped head.

"You will see enough of me, I daresay, though I've no time for gossiping. I should not be here now if someone had not taken my part and left me to hang about without anything to go on with."

Hilary was wondering what a "part" was and framing a question when the door opened and Mrs. Pederson swept in like a whirlwind.

"My dear Hilary, to think you should arrive in this way without kiss or welcome!"

She bore breathlessly down upon the girl and folded her in the embrace of two bony arms, while her eyes wandered across the room to its other occupant.

"You here, Frances! I'm sure I ought

to be flattered by such an unusual show of attention."

"No doubt you are, my dear mother," Frances responded coolly. "You certainly owe me some thanks for taking your place this afternoon and doing my small best to make up for your absence. It looked a little unkind to Hilary to let her come 'without kiss or welcome,' as you put it."

"I don't need you to teach me what I should do or leave undone," Mrs. Pederson retorted tartly, as she sank into a chair, tossed her little sailor hat upon another, and threw open her smart fawn coat. "You might have had sense to order some tea."

She rang the bell with a jerk which filled the house with discordant clangour.

Hilary, during these amenities, sat silently studying her hostess, divided between mirth and dismay. She had never before met anyone the least like her, and mentally compared her with dear old Madame Brun, who had so beautifully mastered the art of growing old gracefully.

Mrs. Pederson was a thin, fashionably attired woman of sixty or so, with an expression partly of ill-health and partly of discontent

on her pinched, colourless face. Her grey hair was curled stiffly back from her forehead in a fashion which reminded Hilary of nothing so much as a corrugated iron fence. It was said that Mrs. Pederson had been a beauty in her youth, and there were some who believed the rumour. Mrs. Pederson did so herself, and dressed to suit the part in bold defiance of the ravages of time.

In spite of her failure in the matter of a welcome, she was frankly pleased to see her niece, and her questions concerning her journey and the schooldays which lay behind it were kind and well-meant. They chatted over the tea-table until Frances began to make ready to depart, and then Mrs. Pederson rang for a maid to take Hilary to the room prepared for her.

"You mustn't go till you tell me what you think of her, Frances," she said, as soon as they were alone. Though there was not much warmth in her affection for her daughter, she relied a good deal on her judgment. "Do you think I shall get on with her? She seems nice, and quite a child in spite of her age."

Frances stared into the gaily decorated grate as she answered:

"I wish she had not come, though you will like her well enough. She is not our sort, mother—a cut above us, just as the Major was."

Mrs. Pederson reddened and tossed her head. She was one of those who resent superiority in an acquaintance and regard it as an insult in a relative.

"The Pedersons have always been as poor as church mice," she said crossly. "The Kemsings could have bought them up any time these twenty years. This girl has only her ninety pounds a year, whilst you and I, my good Frances, may call ourselves fairly well-off."

Frances straightened her hat before the glass, and her lip curled disagreeably.

"I suppose it is no use me telling you once again, my dear mother, that money is not everything. There are a few things it cannot buy, things that are as natural as the air we breathe to Hilary and the Major. There are some of your visitors, too, whom she might not care to meet."

Mrs. Pederson's thin face flushed with anger and her fingers worked nervously.

"I don't know what you mean, Frances. You were always a disrespectful child."

Frances looked at her with a softening of her dark eyes. After all, it was never any use arguing with her mother, and it widened the breach which, in her better moments, the girl honestly regretted.

"Poor dear mother, I always rub you up the wrong way," she said, with a laugh. "Perhaps you'll get more satisfaction out of Hilary. If you'll let her, I'm sure she will love you. She is simply overflowing with good-will."

Yet as she walked back to her rooms in Skone Street, Frances wished heartily that it had not occurred to her stepfather to stipulate for Hilary's presence in Markham Square.

"It came of his disapproval of me," she said shrewdly. "He wouldn't have the mater left to her own resources entirely. He was afraid that if she got lonely she would be driven to commandeer me. Poor, dear mother! she won't have anything to complain of in the substitute he has provided if one may judge from first impressions."

CHAPTER III.

COBWEBS.

"My dear Hilary, do you remember that it is exactly three months since you came to be my dear little daughter?" Mrs. Pederson always ignored the manifest fact that her niece was nearly a head taller than herself. "Three happy months! I never dreamed that we should get on so admirably together." She smiled expansively and looked at her companion with her head drooped languishingly on one side.

They were seated at luncheon in the commonplace dining-room, which always seemed to Hilary the ugliest and dullest room imaginable.

"I had awful visions, you know," Mrs. Pederson went on gaily, "visions of a blowsy schoolgirl, with red cheeks and aggressive manners, who would be always in the way. It was such a relief to find we did not interfere with each other's pleasure in the least, but got on perfectly."

Hilary smiled inscrutably. She had soon

discovered that "getting on" with Mrs. Pederson meant following her lead unquestioningly, and having no private ends at all to serve.

"I'm sure I'm glad you are pleased with me, Aunt Sophie," she replied good-temperedly. "It would have been distinctly unpleasant if I had not happened to suit you."

Mrs. Pederson laughed. "How outspoken you are, child! But there's nothing I admire more than perfect openness. I always spit out just what I feel myself and never think another word about it. I remember so well what my poor old father used to say—he was a Thames pilot, you know, in the days when fortunes were made on the river: 'Sophie, mind this, if there's to be peace in a house, there must be no secrets and perfect oneness of mind.' I've thought of his words many a time, but I never could get Pederson to see the truth of them. Your uncle Gervase was an awful man for having his own way."

Hilary bent over her plate to hide the merriment in her blue eyes. Under Mrs. Pederson's roof there must be only one mind and that her own. If the late Major were fond of his own way there was little wonder

that life had not run very smoothly at No. 10. It was not that Mrs. Pederson meant to be tyrannical, but she laboured under a constitutional disability to see any aspect of a question except her own.

If Hilary had come to Markham Square with any ideas of finding life there wider and more full of change than that she had spent under Madame Brun's roof, she was woefully mistaken. Every moment was occupied, but there was a lamentable monotony in the manner of filling them. Mrs. Pederson monopolised her throughout the day whilst protesting that she desired to leave her entirely free to please herself. From the morning hour when, breakfast over, she drew an armchair to the window and sat down to absorb the contents of the newspaper, she claimed the girl's undivided attention and resented any diminution of her interest in the discussion of the day's doings.

Mrs. Pederson was one of those who like to put each hour, as it were, in a frame, and her arrangements, like the laws of the Medes and Persians, were irrefragable. Not until she went away on household cares intent could Hilary feel at liberty to take up her book or

open her letters. Even then she was subject to little tempestuous visits, for Aunt Sophie had no idea of enjoying a surprise or enduring a wrong at the hands of her staff without sharing it with every member of the household.

At No. 10, Markham Square, the perfection of cleanliness and order was only achieved by an enormous expenditure of noise and confusion. The cook, housemaids, and the invaluable Mantle were marshalled hither and thither at Mrs. Pederson's command, and her voice could be continually heard, chanticleering orders from distant parts of the house.

Hilary declared that it was fatiguing to follow, even in thought, the race-course of Aunt Sophie's day. She was one of those tirelessly busy people whose energy does not require a serious object. To the smallest detail she gave the heated discussion and the concentration of attention which most people reserve for epoch-making crises.

Those who knew the late Major Pederson wondered sometimes what could have induced him to marry a woman so oddly different from the women of his own class, and a few whispered that her substantial fortune had been a temptation. The Major had always been an

extravagant and self-indulgent man, and half-pay leaves little margin for luxuries. His reward had been in excess of that usually accorded to those who marry for mean motives. In spite of her eccentricities, Mrs. Pederson made him a devoted and admiring wife. There was no denying her goodness of heart even when her manners left most to be desired.

She looked up from the newspaper which always lay beside her plate when Hilary rose from the table.

"Are you going already, my dear? I was about to tell you of Eliza's rudeness to me this morning. Her conduct was such—— Well, there was nothing for it but to give her notice."

Hilary shook her head. "I really can't stay now, Aunt Sophie, so please let the tale of Eliza's enormities wait. You remember I promised to go round to Frances' lodgings at two o'clock. She has an afternoon free, and we are going somewhere together."

Mrs. Pederson's smile vanished, and she tossed her head crossly. The friendship which had sprung up between the two girls had not the seal of her approval. It threatened to limit her own share of Hilary's society, and though she could be generous on a large scale, in

small matters she was essentially mean. She said to herself that it was solely on Hilary's account she objected to the intimacy. Frances had always been opinionated and unmanageable. She had never, even as a child, shown proper respect to her elders, and she would try to imbue Hilary with her wild independent notions.

"This is the third time in a fortnight you have spent half the day with Frances, Hilary," she said, in a tone which was itself an impeachment. "You see more in Frances than most people do, I must say. I'm glad, poor girl, that somebody finds her amiable. She can't have many friends with her bad temper. But don't forget, my dear, that your uncle desired you to be *my* companion, not Frances'. I have always the first claim."

Hilary nodded, and a little smile curved her mouth. She was used to Aunt Sophie's protests now and they did not ruffle her in the least.

"I'll send a note to Frances and ask her to come here, if you really want me, dear," she said good-temperedly. "I thought you overheard me make the arrangement with Frances."

"No, you can go; I don't want to be a check on your pleasures," Mrs. Pederson replied,

with a resigned droop of the corners of her mouth. "Only don't forget that I have the first claim on you."

She made the protest merely in accordance with her fixed idea that Hilary would be only too ready to deny her claims and that it was well to keep them before her mind. She was secretly glad to be free from the girl's company for a few hours, for she expected a visitor whom she was by no means anxious to introduce to her niece.

Frances Kemsing lived in a rather dingy street off the Tottenham Court Road. The house was half-way down, on the shady side, and distinguished from its neighbours by a row of blue flower-pots in which a few pink ivy-geraniums had a precarious existence. This attempt at decoration was not to be attributed to Frances. To everything which did not bear upon her work she was absolutely indifferent, but she submitted to any amenities projected by her companion, Ursula Grantham.

It was wholly due, also, to Miss Grantham's efforts that the front parlour which Hilary entered, a few minutes later, was picturesque and exquisitely neat. Frances would have worked comfortably in chaos, but Ursula loved

to have everything about her as beautiful and orderly as herself.

"Besides, we owe it to the profession to look nice and have nice surroundings," she would tell Frances decisively. "If we live in a muddle and look like a rag-bag we can't expect men to imagine that it improves things generally for us to take up professions. When they begin to talk of the women of other days and to praise their domestic virtues, I know they have been studying such girls as May Limpfield or Anne Meadows, who seem to imagine there is some special grace in wearing ugly, ill-made gowns and leaving their hair unbrushed. You may think yourself fortunate, Frances Kemsing, that you have me to look after you."

Frances was bending over a large, workman-like table in the window when Hilary came in.

"Here I am, Frances, having braved Aunt Sophie's displeasure to reach you," she cried, stooping over her cousin to kiss her. "It is such a lovely afternoon that we ought not to waste a moment of it indoors."

"My good child, there's a time for embracing and a time to refrain from embracing. It is the time for refraining, though I can't

expect you to see it," said Frances, coolly disengaging herself from Hilary's encircling arms. "I've been two solid hours arranging this dissection, and I don't want it upset, if you please. Just sit down somewhere out of the way for a few minutes, and then I will talk to you."

Hilary sat down in a well-cushioned armchair which manifestly belonged to the luxurious Ursula, and settled herself to wait with patience Frances' pleasure.

In ten minutes the student pushed back her chair and stretched her arms out with a tired gesture.

"It's going to be a beautiful dissection. These bits of minute work are awfully fascinating," she said. "I've got to a splendidly interesting point. Another hour's work will see it finished."

Hilary lifted her eyebrows.

"My dear Frances, have you forgotten that you promised to go out with me? We've tickets for that flower show on the Embankment."

Frances ran her fingers through her short dark hair and frowned. "Oh, that's out of question to-day, Hilary. I'm sorry, but

I should not feel happy to leave my work at this stage. I should be thinking of my dissection all the time and worrying to get back to it."

"I'm sure you would lose nothing by taking an afternoon's rest, Francie," Hilary replied. "You work too hard. Ursula Grantham often says that to work without any rest or recreation is the way to court failure."

Frances shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, don't quote Ursula to me, I have her at first hand morning, noon, and night!" she exclaimed sharply. "You must not go by what she says. She has ridiculous luck herself in exams. She will dance through the finals with one half the work we others have to give. By the way, Hilary, if you want an outing, you might go into Lambeth with her this afternoon. I'm sure she will be glad of your company, and then the thought of having spoilt your afternoon will be off my mind. Here she comes, all ready to start. Nuttie, I want you to take Hilary with you. I promised to go with her to a flower show, but at the point of departure I am too busy."

"That's your way, and a very bad way it is, Francie," said the newcomer, smiling. She

was a tall girl, fair-haired, with a calm, strong face which showed none of the strain and the eager unrest which was in Frances'. She might have been the model for Werther's Charlotte of bread-and-butter-cutting fame, though she had taken her Tripos at Cambridge and ranked among the most brilliant students of her hospital. Hilary admired her greatly. If Frances had been her sole example of the student and the hard worker she might have been inclined to agree with Mrs. Pederson that such careers were a mistake for girls, but Ursula Grantham forever reversed such opinions. You could not imagine a sick-room or a scene of misery which would not be the brighter and better for beautiful, serene Ursula Grantham's presence.

Hilary was not surprised to find that Miss Grantham's errand this afternoon was one of charity. She had promised to find out the friends of a girl who had been brought into the hospital a few days before and to make them acquainted with the patient's progress. It was like Ursula to allow such a mission to dip into her scanty leisure, and Frances had not scrupled to call her a fool for her pains.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. PEDERSON'S VISITOR.

URSULA GRANTHAM'S destination was a certain street not far from the Westminster Bridge Road, a squalid, irregularly built street, where a public-house at one corner and a fried fish shop at another vied with one another in odorising the air. The pavement swarmed with children, and at the doors dirty, unkempt women suspended their gossip to stare at the two girls.

It was evident that Ursula was no stranger in Cross Street. Three or four women wished her a "good afternoon" and she readily obtained what information she required to find Maude Flitter's home.

The name "Flitter" appeared in faded letters over a second-hand clothes shop some way down the street, and, bidding Hilary wait outside for her, Ursula dived into its gloomy recesses.

She reappeared presently, followed by a red-faced woman, who was talking volubly and

darning at the same time a much-worn coat. Ursula looked vexed and hot, and, after a little more talk with the woman, said "good afternoon" and joined Hilary.

"You don't look as though the interview had been a pleasant one, Ursula," Hilary said as they turned homeward.

Ursula shook her head. "It appears that Maude went to the hospital against her mother's wish. Mrs. Flitter has a rooted belief that hospitals are repositories where we kill off the patients in the shortest possible time for our own ends. She wants Maude home, though I assured her that the girl is doing splendidly. I made a point of asking the ward sister to-day that I might give the latest news. Of course, we have nothing to do with the patients ourselves, though I go and chat with several of them when I have a few minutes to spare. It is one of the forms of recreation I indulge in, you know, when I get fagged with the work.

"It is more than that, Ursula," Hilary replied quietly. "Who is it says that our recreations, not our labours, are the index to our characters? Somehow," she added, laughing, "I can fancy you a nurse, or a Sister of the

Poor, or a deaconess of some kind; but to imagine you a doctor, sitting in a luxurious consulting-room, waiting for patients, seems ridiculous."

Ursula joined in the laugh. "Well it may, indeed. I could not fancy myself in that position at all. No, Hilary, I have my ambitions, but they do not run in that direction."

"Why, I thought you and Frances thought of nothing else but passing the exams. and taking your degrees," Hilary said.

Ursula walked on in silence for a few minutes.

"I love my work, and, of course, I care immensely about passing the finals well; but they are the steps to a very different end to that you picture," she said quietly. "Some day I mean to practise down in these mean streets, to use my skill and knowledge for the benefit of these poor people, who are so ignorant that they will seldom come to us at the hospital until they are past remedies. Some of them are actually afraid of us. You cannot imagine what stories I have heard from them. They think we want their poor, shrunken, emaciated bodies for our dissections, and that, once in our clutches, we shall never let them go again with their full

number of limbs. When I get through, I shall come and live down here and teach them to think differently. Besides, it is not always mere medicine they want. They often need what only we girls can give them—love, sympathy, and a gleam of hope for the future. The 'doctor' ought to mean more to these poor creatures than it does to people in happier circumstances."

Ursula spoke rapidly, and there was a moved expression on her usually calm face.

Hilary pressed her arm as it lay within her own. She was always quick to appreciate the generous and true-hearted in others, and she gave her companion the meed of her girlish admiration without stint.

"No wonder you are so lucky in exams.," she said warmly. "You couldn't fail with such a motive."

Ursula nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I have felt that sometimes myself," she said simply; "I am helped so that I do not get worried and nervous as some of the girls do. The work does not hurt one much if one can take it quietly." She stopped abruptly, and Hilary knew she was thinking of Frances, who minimised her own chances of success by the feverish

eagerness with which she worked and the relentlessness of her study.

It was late in the afternoon when Hilary got back to Markham Square. She expected to find Aunt Sophie in no very pleasant humour, for if there was one thing that lady disliked more than another, it was to be kept waiting for her tea. Looking at her watch, Hilary saw that it must already be carried to the library, where Mrs. Pederson elected to drink it during the hot days.

"I wish I could have persuaded Ursula to come back with me," she said to herself, thinking of the long evening *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Pederson which lay before her. She knew exactly how it would be spent, and laughed a little in amused self-pity. What would Madame or her girls think if they could see their favourite consuming hour after hour in dominoes, beggar-my-neighbour, or spilikins, games which she cordially hated?

Mrs. Pederson's sole idea of amusement was to play games of a more or less exciting kind and she threw herself into them with ardour. Over the most trivial game she became another creature; her very features seemed to sharpen with uncanny interest; her eyes glittered,

and discordant shrieks of glee or dismay marked her success or failure.

Hilary was but a few paces from No. 10 when the door opened and a young man came down the steps. The girl glanced at him curiously, though she had long ago discovered that Mrs. Pederson received visitors who could scarcely belong to her own world, and whose presence she explained vaguely to her niece as "business."

He was a short, clean-shaven man, showily dressed in a snuff-coloured check suit and a brilliant tie confined in a heavy gold ring. He stared at Hilary with admiration in his beady brown eyes as she passed him, and turned to stare again, whistling softly, as she went up the steps he had just descended.

"What an odious man!" Hilary said to herself, as she opened the door with her latchkey. "What can have been his business with Aunt Sophie?"

She went quickly across the hall and opened the door of the library. On the threshold she paused abruptly and caught her breath in surprise.

The setting sun illumined the room and showed Mrs. Pederson crouched on the hearth-

rug, swaying to and fro in a storm of petulant sobs, while she called on powers visible and invisible to witness that she was a cheated and ruined woman.

"Dear Aunt Sophie, what is the matter? Who has been injuring you?" Hilary cried, running across the room and kneeling down beside this victim of outrageous fortune. "Has that odious man been insulting you? He looked capable of it!"

Mrs. Pederson sprang to her feet with an agility remarkable considering her age.

"How you startled me, Hilary! I had no idea you were in the house!" she exclaimed angrily. "And what are you talking about? If it is Chivers Smith you are calling 'odious,' let me tell you that is my man of business and my very good friend, and I expect him to be treated with respect when he comes to my house. I hope to goodness you have not been treating him to any of your high and mighty airs." There was a shade of anxiety under the coarse petulance of the excited woman's tone.

Hilary leaned against the corner of the table and looked at her aunt with a rising colour.

"Do you mean a vulgar little man with a horsey air and diabolically dressed, whom I saw leave the house just a few minutes ago?" she asked coldly. "I hope I am never rude to anyone, and as I had no opportunity nor desire to speak to him, he cannot resent anything I have said."

Mrs. Pederson looked at her for a moment in speechless exasperation; when Hilary spoke in that tone, "just the Major's tone," she always felt herself hopelessly at a disadvantage. Then she dropped into a chair and began to sob with childish abandon. There was nothing pathetic about poor Mrs. Pederson's woe. Her cast of countenance was not fashioned for tears, and Hilary, despite her ruffled feelings, struggled for a moment with emotions sadly out of harmony with the Scriptural injunction to weep with those that weep.

She came nearer and put her arm round her aunt's thin shoulders.

"Do tell me what troubles you, Aunt Sophie," she begged, touched by a grief which must surely be great though she was entirely ignorant of its cause. "You surely don't mean me to conclude that little monster has the power to move you like this?"

There was a faint diminution of the petulant sobs, and Hilary went on coaxingly.

"Of course, I may not be able to help you in the least, but it generally makes things easier to bear when someone shares the burden. I have felt ever since I came that you had some hidden worries."

Mrs. Pederson looked into the girlish face bent to hers hesitatingly, then she wrenched herself impatiently from the encircling arm.

"What nonsense you are talking, Hilary! You are like the Major, always making mountains out of molehills. What worries should I have, pray, beyond the wear and tear of managing the house and my money matters, though you are enough, I am sure, to drive one to the verge of insanity. I have got one of my neuralgic attacks, and talking to Chivers Smith has made it unbearable."

Hilary moved away to the window, her head held high and a hard look in her blue eyes. She was not used to having her sympathy thrust aside as superfluous, and she knew Mrs. Pederson was not honest with her. With the haste of youth she concluded that the falsehood hid something discreditable, and she

told herself that she wished to know nothing about it.

She stood looking across at the tall grey houses on the other side of the square, feeling her spirit in revolt against the narrowness and the vague entanglements of the life she had now to live, full of longing for the old quiet, sunny life, in which the searchlight of truth could find nothing to bring a blush to the cheek.

Mrs. Pederson's metallic voice broke the uncomfortable silence.

"I don't want your pity and all that sort of thing, but perhaps you will not mind taking the trouble to tell Mantle that I'll have some tea in my own room," she said. "This is too cold to drink now and the muffins are like leather. Tell her she may toast me two more, and I shan't come down to dinner. I daresay you can manage to amuse yourself."

Hilary assented gravely.

"I'll tell Mantle what you say," she replied, without looking round.

At the door Mrs. Pederson stopped and stood for a minute fingering the door-plate.

"When you see Frances, Hilary, you need not tell her that Chivers Smith called," she

said sharply. "I know you girls exchange all sorts of confidences."

"No, I won't mention it," Hilary said, still without turning her head.

Mrs. Pederson looked at her curiously and then went out, banging the door noisily behind her.

Hilary stood for a long time looking into the quiet square in which the twilight was gathering. In one window after another of the houses opposite sprang a yellow spark of gaslight, and the lamplighter on the pavement was running from post to post with his long rod. The girl watched him with unseeing eyes, busy with her own thoughts.

Three months! It seemed like as many years since she left Paris. She had wondered then how she should adapt herself to her altered circumstances. She found it no question of adaptation. She moved on another plane altogether, a plane where "the comely fashion to be glad," which had hitherto been the rule of her life, was surprisingly difficult to follow.

The air seemed full of sordid little cares, of mysteries and uncertainties of which she was vaguely conscious without being able to define

them. They clung about her like cobwebs, and she could not get free from their stifling influence.

The business-like documents which came so often, and which Mrs. Pederson read with such feverish eagerness and hid away lest Frances should see them, the frequent expeditions into the City, vaguely explained as "business," the commonplace, often vulgar, visitors who left behind them a worried and irritable hostess, all suggested to Hilary something below the surface she was not allowed to know.

"It's a thousand pities that, like the lamented Sherlock Holmes, I cannot help being observant," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "I hate myself for developing such a talent for suspicion. Besides, it is so much more comfortable not to see things you are not meant to see, and to be certain that everything about you is right and straightforward. I am not surprised that Aunt Sophie should not consult me about her business, but why should she make such a point of keeping Frances in the dark about the merest details?"

She knew that, in her own way, Mrs. Pederson loved Frances and relied on her judgment. If she feared Frances' criticism it

must be because she knew that Frances would condemn.

Mrs. Pederson did not appear again, and Hilary ate her dinner in solitary state. It was some compensation to remember that there would be no spilikins or dominoes to wile away the long evening hours. She went back to the library and sat down to write her weekly letter to Madame Brun. It was astonishing how much she found to tell her old governess, and she enjoyed the writing of these letters almost as much as Madame Brun did the reading of them.

This evening the tide of Hilary's eloquence ebbed to extinction. She could not concentrate her mind on a vivacious account of her afternoon's expedition, nor find words to tell of the week's happenings.

In spite of a valiant determination not to trouble herself about Aunt Sophie's affairs, the thought of her vexation and its evident connection with Chivers Smith would come between her and the sheets of paper.

Hilary's was a singularly open and direct nature. She disliked any necessity for concealment and abhorred deceit. To know that those with whom she must spend her life had

schemes and worries of which she was kept ignorant, presumably because she was unfit or not trustworthy enough to share them, hurt and angered her. If there were wrong she did not wish to know it, but she wanted to be allowed to help and sympathise in any trouble.

She got up and moved restlessly about the room. Like all Mrs. Pederson's rooms, it was hot and close, and the aroma of the afternoon's muffins still hung about it. She longed to throw open one of the windows, but that would have been a bold defiance of the rules of the house. At sundown every window of No. 10 was shut and bolted for the night.

"I'll finish my letter and go out and post it," she said, sitting down at the writing-table again. "A breath of fresh air will blow away the dismals; I hate to feel mopish and dull."

She added a few lines to her letter, saying she was "too tired, cross, worried, anything dear Madame liked to think, to continue the history of her daily doings," then folded the sheet of paper, put it into an envelope and addressed it.

Mantle was crossing the hall as Hilary unbolted the hall door.

"Miss Hilary! You are not going out at

this hour of the night surely?" she exclaimed. "Whatever would mistress say! If you want your letter posted particular to-night, I'll send Eliza with it."

Hilary laughed and shook her head.

"I shall not be gone ten minutes, and no one will hurt me," she said. "A breath of fresh air I must and will have, even at the risk of shocking you and Mrs. Grundy, my good Mantle."

The maid looked dubious and half inclined to follow the girl, but Hilary settled the matter by shutting the door behind her and running down the steps into the square.

The nearest letter-box was in the next square, and as Hilary walked briskly towards it, she felt her spirits rise. The cool air fanned her cheeks and the rapid movement stirred her blood.

"After all," she said, half aloud, "I may, as Aunt Sophie says, be making a mountain out of a molehill. I must not judge her by the standard of manners and feelings set up by dear Madame."

She paused under the gas-lamp beside the letter-box to verify the address before committing her missive to the post.

A man, passing at the moment, stared at the girlish face lit by the falling light, and stopped abruptly with a familiar "Good evening."

Hilary started and looked at the stranger with surprise and annoyance, then turned away with her head held high. She had recognised at once the thick-set figure in the loud check suit, and concluded rightly that its owner had seen her enter No. 10 earlier in the day. But that gave him no right to address her, she said to herself indignantly. She might live under Aunt Sophie's roof, but that lady's acquaintances were not necessarily hers.

Chivers Smith seemed to think otherwise. He lifted his hat and turned to walk with her in the direction of Markham Square.

"Miss Pederson, I think," he said coolly. "The moment I saw you under the lamp I said in the words of the song, 'Where have I seen that face before?' and then it came back to me like a shot. I saw you go into No. 10 this afternoon, and since you had a latchkey I made a good guess that you lived there. You are the niece the old lady has talked about, and too pretty a girl to be mixed up with her little affairs."

Hilary interrupted him in a tone which was meant to be cutting, though he walked on with her apparently unwounded.

"Please go away. I do not know you and you have no right to speak to me."

"If you have not heard of Chivers Smith, my dear young lady, you will live and learn," he said genially. "I don't need you to tell me it is not just the correct thing to make myself known to you like this, but it's worth your while to listen to me. If you'll take my advice you won't cut up rough when Chivers Smith wants to give you a tip."

Hilary's cheeks burned and she quickened her pace. She had not even guessed that the world held such odious people as the man beside her, and that he should speak to her in this manner was incredible. He threatened her too! No doubt he menaced poor Aunt Sophie in the same manner; but she was not afraid of him as Aunt Sophie manifestly was, though why she should be was past understanding. What power could he really have over a woman in Mrs. Pederson's position? What claim could he possibly hold against her?

"Your threats are nothing to me," she said contemptuously. "I do not wish to hear any-

thing you may have to say. What harm could you ever do me or Mrs. Pederson, even if you had the heart to inflict injury on a fellow creature?"

The young man laughed with evident amusement.

"In our way of business we don't stop short through any little weaknesses of the heart," he said, disagreeably. "You may be sure of this, though, that any harm that comes to Mrs. Pederson will lie at her own door. She won't want much helping. There aren't many have her spirit and go."

Hilary bit her lip. Would she never reach No. 10, and was there no way of shaking off this detestable man? Why had she not been guided by Mantle, who saw the folly of strolling out alone after dinner? She walked swiftly, looking straight before her, her eyes ablaze with indignation.

"I say, you are thinking me an awful cad, Miss Pederson."

Hilary did not deny the fact, though it only faintly described her feeling.

"And honestly, I only wanted to give you a tip. It is the first and only thoroughly disinterested thing that has ever been set to my

credit, and it seems as though kindness doesn't pay very high dividends," the young man said, in a tone of half-mocking apology.

Hilary turned and looked him full in the face.

"Your ideas of kindness and honour and mine differ. I refuse to hear my aunt's private business from any lips but her own. As for your threats and your hints of future disaster unless we court your favour, I do not care for them in the least. You may have a score of evil plots in your mind, but I will never believe that a man like you has power to hurt me or mine."

She saw that for some reason her words hit him hard, and she was glad of it. She turned from him, and running up the steps, let herself into the house and shut the door behind her.

Chivers Smith stood for a moment on the pavement looking after her. Then he laughed softly and thrust his hands deep in the pockets of his short coat.

"I like her spirit and that way she has of looking straight at one, but spirit and pride won't help her if she's dependent on the old lady. It'll be a pity, for she's a cut above

Mrs. P. and worth a better fate than losing her bottom dollar."

He moved off in the direction of the City, whistling thoughtfully. It was not often that Chivers Smith thought for half an hour consecutively of anything but money, but to-night, as he let himself into his dingy office in Chancery Lane, he was still thinking of Hilary Pederson and the lift of her head as she told him that her thoughts were not his thoughts nor her world his world.

In the chequered course of his life it had not fallen to his lot to see many girls of Hilary's type. His own sisters were altogether different, and they were almost strangers to him. Nor had their open contempt for himself tended to bridge the gulf or to sweeten the relations between them. Men and women usually showed their darkest side to Chivers Smith, and his intercourse with them was seldom pleasant.

Nominally a stockbroker, he was actually a moneylender of the most usurious type, and those who came to his little office seldom cherished any but the most bitter memories of their transactions with him. His brokerage seemed mere gambling when their money was

gone, and his loans, so genially offered, were of no tangible or lasting benefit.

One thing was certain, the young man was laying by money and might already be called wealthy. It was his ambition to be a prominent man in the City and to take his place in a social circle above that in which he had been born. He believed that he could achieve these heights if he were rich, extraordinarily rich, and to the making of money he set himself to the exclusion of all other interests.

To-night, after his interview with Hilary, he felt that he had caught a glimpse of the world it was his ambition to enter, and which he began dimly to see was not all money-making and self-aggrandisement. Something in Hilary's clear eyes told him more convincingly than words that she would never sell honour for social position, nor would she cringe before him though he robbed her of her last penny. He might cheat her and defraud her, but she would have no feeling for him but contempt or pity. If she were driven to sweep a crossing for a living she would still be miles above him. She breathed a mental atmosphere too rarefied for him.

No one is wholly base or callous, and that Chivers Smith could recognise these qualities in Hilary Pederson in one brief interview, and give them the meed of his admiration, argued that he was not yet wholly the slave of greed.

Hilary had builded better than she knew that night.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW FRIEND.

MRS. PEDERSON had this grace, she never nursed her grievances. They might overwhelm her for the moment, but when she found they did not kill, she rose superior to them.

She came down to breakfast next morning with a face wreathed with smiles, and in a blouse of exceptional smartness.

Evidently the painful hour in the library was to be ignored, and Hilary discreetly abstained from inquiry concerning the neuralgic headache.

"My dear Hilary, I have made such a delightful plan for spending the day," Mrs. Pederson said, when her temporal needs had been carefully supplied and Eliza had been twice summoned to convey messages of complaint and reproof to the cook. "A delightful whole day's outing. It came into my head as I lay awake this morning."

Hilary looked up from her plate without any overpowering sense of elation. She shrewdly

guessed that the main object of these matutinal cogitations was to supply her with a new interest which should oust any tendency to dwell on the visit of Chivers Smith.

"I have not seen my cousin Paul Kemsing for months," Mrs. Pederson went on airily. "He is an artist, you know, with a charming house at Sydenham, quite a palatial place in its way, not large, but exquisitely furnished. I believe he got one of the big firms to do it throughout, though, of course, under his own direction. Paul always had such queer taste—the fruit of having the artistic temperament, I suppose. I have not seen anything of him for ages, for he and your Uncle Gervase did not get on very well. It is a lovely morning, we could not have a nicer day for an excursion. I will send Eliza to order a carriage and we will drive down to Sydenham to lunch."

"But, Aunt Sophie, if we are not expected won't it be awkward for Mr. Kemsing to have us pounce down on him in that unceremonious way?" said Hilary, though the expedition sounded inviting.

Mrs. Pederson tossed her head.

"My goodness, Hilary! as if relations couldn't visit without a formal invitation. And to describe

my lunching with my cousin Paul as 'pouncing'! I might be a hawk or a beast of prey to hear you!"

"I recall the opprobrious term," said Hilary, laughing. "If you are sure that Mr. Kemsing will welcome us, it will be a delightful outing."

"There is the Crystal Palace to fall back upon if Paul happens to be away from home," Mrs. Pederson added, as she proceeded with her breakfast and advised Hilary to follow her example.

"Pleasuring is hungry work," she explained; "I always make a point of taking plenty of support before I start."

It was arranged that they should leave Markham Square at eleven o'clock, and five minutes before that hour Hilary stood in the dining-room window ready to start. Mrs. Pederson's voice could be heard in the hall, chanticleering a few final orders to the much-enduring Mantle with an energy unsubdued by the heat of the day.

"Oh, how can people fuss so with the thermometer at seventy in the shade?" said Hilary to herself, as she picked up her sunshade. A glance into the square, however, told her that this would be a superfluous

addition to her toilet. With her usual precaution against draughts and chills, Mrs. Pederson had ordered a closed carriage.

"Oh, dear! I wish I had not started the day with a headache," sighed the girl, as she went slowly down the steps and took her seat beside her aunt. "It will be terribly hot boxed up in a brougham this warm morning."

"I'm glad I thought of taking you to Sydenham to-day, Hilary," Mrs. Pederson said, as the carriage rolled out of Markham Square. "You look quite pale and as though a breath of country air would be just the thing for you. You've a headache? I've never known you to have one before, so it must be the heat. Take my vinaigrette, it's an invaluable specific. I want my little adopted daughter to make a good impression on Paul Kemsing."

She pressed the gold-topped bottle fussily upon Hilary, who declared the headache would pass away, and declined the remedy.

Aunt Sophie shook her head dubiously. She had a firm belief that no malady "passed" without stringent measures, and for headache that particular vinaigrette was simply miraculous. She chattered on of numerous acquaintances who had tested its virtues and risen up

to call her blessed, whilst Hilary listened dreamily, putting in a word now and then as an earnest of her attention.

She did not anticipate much pleasure from the visit to the artist; so many of Aunt Sophie's swans turned out to be very commonplace geese; but the drive, after a while, became delightful. The carriage bowled through tree-shaded roads, past parks and well-kept gardens ablaze with flowers.

"I wished we lived out here instead of in dull Markham Square, Aunt Sophie," she said, craning her head out of the window in a most undignified fashion. "Isn't it possible for us to change our abode?"

Mrs. Pederson shook her head. "Thank goodness, I've a long lease of the house; but I would not leave it if I could. I should die if I had to stay here a whole month. It is pretty enough, but give me the streets and the shops, with plenty of life and stir. Your uncle once took a house on Dartford Heath for a year, but the empty, endless days drove me wild. If I had not been able to run up to town once a week and bike all over the place I should have gone mad."

Mrs. Pederson was an ardent cyclist despite

the fact that she rode execrably, and always returned from a ride with the exultant air of one who has faced death and conquered it by her own skill and agility. Her description of a ride always bristled with hairbreadth escapes and unlucky "spills."

"We will cycle down here next time we come, Hilary," she said with decision. "The roads are good, and it is not nearly so far as your uncle Gervase pretended. Ah! here we are at last. I wonder whether we shall find Paul at home."

The carriage drew up as she spoke at a little green gate upon which was painted in white letters "The Nook." The gate was set in a long brick wall over which peeped a tangle of roses and the gnarled branches of ancient fruit trees. Through the bloom and the lacework of boughs Hilary caught sight of the gables and chimneys of a red-brick house set high above the road on a grassy bank.

She sprang out of the carriage and took a long breath of the soft, fragrant air, wondering how anyone in their senses could prefer the dusty, dingy town to this heavenly spot.

"You can go and find some place to bait the horses and return for us in three hours,"

Mrs. Pederson directed the coachman. "Now, Hilary, don't stand gaping around you as though you had never seen a tree before. Let us go up to the house and make sure of some luncheon. It's unfortunate that Paul is one of the tiresome people who don't care a row of pins about their food, for it makes the prospect of our being decently fed more problematical."

"Beggars mustn't be choosers," cried Hilary merrily. "I feel as though I want nothing but the proverbial cup of cold water and permission to ramble about this lovely old garden."

A bell hung beside the gate, and Mrs. Pederson pulled it vigorously. In a few minutes the gate was opened by an old man with a face rosy and wrinkled as a winter apple, and eyes which twinkled humorously.

"I wish to see Mr. Kemsing—Mr. Paul Kemsing," said Mrs. Pederson. "I wish to see him at once."

She always spoke with great slowness and many repetitions when she addressed those of a lower station, as though she imagined that their faculties were in the same ratio to her own as their worldly position.

"The master is at home, but whether

he's to be seen is a coat of another colour," the old man replied, studying the visitor as though she were a denizen of another world. "He don't set much store by women callers; sort of interrupts his work, you see." His beady eyes twinkled more than ever. "There's some as say that he don't lose much anyway."

"What an extraordinary old man!" Mrs. Pederson exclaimed. "I should think Paul must be setting up a private lunatic asylum." She adopted a louder tone and a more conciliatory manner. "My good creature, you don't understand me. I am not an ordinary caller. I am a relation of your master's, a cousin of his, by name Mrs. Pederson. Take me and my niece to the house and then carry my name to your master."

She stepped quickly across the threshold, drawing Hilary after her, and the old man, chuckling to himself, led the way to the entrance of the house.

"It's quite an adventure," giggled Mrs. Pederson. "Paul always managed to get the queerest people about him."

"It's an uncommonly disagreeable adventure," Hilary retorted. "It is not pleasant to feel

that one is forcing oneself into the house unasked and apparently unwelcomed."

"What nonsense, child! Relations certainly have a right to go unasked to each other's homes. Paul and I were great friends in the dear old 'long ago,' though we certainly quarrelled tremendously."

The old man summoned an elderly housekeeper, who led the visitors into a bright little morning-room. There she asked them to be seated whilst she went to tell Mr. Kemsing of their visit.

What manner of man Hilary expected this cousin of Aunt Sophie's to be she scarcely knew, but he had no likeness to the real Paul Kemsing, who entered a few minutes later.

Mr. Kemsing was tall, he had a very high forehead, very shaggy eyebrows which shaded blue and kindly eyes, a shy, courteous manner, and a humorous smile. He wore a silk stock in place of a collar, and a long, oddly fashioned coat of buff linen. In spite of this strange attire he could not be mistaken for anything but a gentleman as he came forward to greet his visitors. Hilary decided on the spot that she liked him, and wondered exceedingly

that he should be even distantly related to Mrs. Pederson.

"My dear Sophie Pederson, this is indeed a surprise," he said; "I wonder what can have recalled my insignificant self to your recollection. And who is this young lady? Not another daughter of the Major's?"

Mrs. Pederson hastened to explain the relationship and to introduce Hilary. "Really my little adopted daughter, you know," she said gushingly.

"She is fortunate, I do not doubt," he replied gravely, yet with an odd twinkle in his eyes. He turned to Hilary and set her at ease by a few kindly questions about her school life, and a word or two of unmistakably sincere welcome.

"You are both going to lunch with me, of course. I have already given Mrs. Murdoch directions," he said. "It is months since I had the company of ladies at my frugal meal. This little festivity comes also on a day when I have brought successfully to completion the work of eighteen months. I always like to mark such a day with some festivity, and this is certainly more charming than a run up to town or a turn in the grounds of the Palace."

"Oh, you have finished another picture," cried Mrs. Pederson. "You must show it to us after luncheon. I hate to see unfinished things, they look such daubs."

"You shall not see the daubs, I promise you," Mr. Kemsing said, smiling.

When luncheon was announced he led the way to the dining-room.

A glance told Mrs. Pederson that she need have no fears concerning the quality of her meal, and she sat down with manifest relief. If the artist cared nothing about such details himself, his domestic arrangements were in excellent hands. A round table was set in the bow window overlooking the garden, and upon it were spread the daintily garnished dishes, the gleaming silver, and the sparkling glass which pertain to a delicately served luncheon.

When they rose from the table the artist proposed an adjournment to the studio. Hilary had charmed him by her sweet, frank talk, and he had a fancy to see how his latest work would strike one who had not been spoilt by a surfeit of galleries and was incapable of giving him pleasant little insincerities.

Mrs. Pederson consulted her watch.

"I told our coachman to come back in three

hours, and we have sat an unconscionable time over luncheon. Suppose you take Hilary to the studio without me, Paul? I must ask your housekeeper how she made that mayonnaise sauce. Those things are really more in my line than pictures, you know."

She bustled off in the direction of the housekeeper's room, calling for "Murdoch" as though she had known that stately personage a dozen years.

The studio to which the old artist led Hilary was a large room built out into the garden. A great north window filled one end, and its walls were draped with quaint hangings, and hung with pictures in a more or less finished condition.

"Now, I will show you anything you think likely to interest you, Miss Hilary," he said kindly. "You must not imagine that you are monopolising time I can ill spare; I am at perfect liberty to-day. You must tell me just what you think of each picture. It does us old people good at times to see how things look through the eyes of the young."

Hilary felt sure that she would never dare to criticise, but before long she found herself chatting quite unrestrainedly with her kindly

host. Long before the hour struck for her departure and Mrs. Pederson appeared in the wake of the tea she had ordered, they were on the border-line of friendship.

As they studied the pictures and chatted about them, the girl had found herself telling him of her own little difficulties and the gulf which lay between her old life and the new.

"I can imagine that the atmosphere of Markham Square is not quite so rarefied as that of the Pension," the artist said slowly. "Tell me, my child, are you happy there?"

Hilary started, and the colour rushed to her cheeks. In the pleasure of talking with one who seemed to understand and sympathise, she had spoken more unguardedly than she intended. She hated to think that her frankness savoured of disloyalty to Aunt Sophie.

"Happy? Yes. Surely one can be happy anywhere," she said lightly. "My old governess used to tell us that happiness was an accomplishment, and that every girl ought to acquire it."

The artist smiled. "She was a wise woman, though I cannot altogether agree with her. Most generalisations have some vulnerable point. Happiness is a gift as well as an

accomplishment. You may throw it away or you may increase it by culture. It is your good fortune to be thus endowed. You may suffer, as we all have to do, but you won't hang the world in black on that account. You are born to recover from calamities. Do you see this sketch?"

He turned a canvas which had been placed on an easel with its face to the wall.

It was an unfinished portrait of a girl scarcely more than Hilary's age, a girl with a small oval face, red lips parted in a frank, sweet smile, and dark eyes sparkling from a tangle of red-gold hair.

"It will never be finished," he said regretfully. "It was painted two years ago, and I hoped to exhibit it. But troubles came to my little friend and she lost interest in life. Now, you would have ridden on the top of the waves which drowned all the brightness Aglae possessed. If anyone saw that picture now they would pass it by as a sketch which merely resembled slightly the Aglae of to-day. Happiness, you see, is a question of will and temperament as well as of acquirement."

"I am afraid you do not know me very well yet, Cousin Paul," Hilary said quickly. "Un-

bridled cheerfulness is not easy even to me. It would be nice to be made of material warranted not to fret, but I have hours when it does not seem possible to be bright or to laugh at things."

"My dear child, I know," the old man said quietly. "But I agree with that old governess of yours in this—your capacity for joy is of the growing sort. It will increase amazingly with effort.

"Take Joy home
And make a place in thy great heart for her,
Then will she come and oft will sing to thee
When thou art working in the furrows—ay,
It is a comely fashion to be glad."

Hilary looked up with shining eyes. "Yes, I have always loved those lines of Miss Ingelow's. I know it is 'a comely fashion to be glad,' but it is not always easy to be in the fashion." She hesitated, and glanced shyly at her companion.

"Will you let me come and see you sometimes, Cousin Paul, when I feel myself getting frumpy? I could cycle down, you know, if I were sure you would not think me intrusive."

"My dear child, come as often and when you like. If I am not in the mood for visitors

"'It will never be finished,' he said regretfully" (*p.* 69).

I shall just tell you so and let you amuse yourself as you please. I think you and I are going to be great friends, though I belong to a past generation, and the young of to-day are rather incomprehensible to their elders."

Hilary laughed. "I have not the reputation for being cryptic, Cousin Paul, I assure you."

It was at this juncture that Mrs. Pederson appeared.

"I hope you two are not quarrelling," she cried banteringly. "You remember that we could not be left together five minutes, Paul, in our young days, without coming to wordy warfare. I have got the recipe I wanted, and your housekeeper is a treasure. Mind you don't quarrel with her and incite her to leave you. It is an awful mistake to offend decent servants. I endure untold impertinences from Mantle because she is such a good soul."

She helped herself to tea and poured out some for her cousin and Hilary, talking so fast all the time that she did not hear the artist's protest that he took neither sugar nor cream.

A few minutes later the carriage was announced, and she haled Hilary away in a bustle of good-byes and promises to "come again," which scarcely called forth profound gratitude from her host.

"My dear Hilary, what did you and Paul find to talk about all that time?" she said, as she sank back breathless in the carriage. "I was pitying you dreadfully, but that good creature, Murdoch, had so much to tell me about the smart people who come to see Paul that I could not tear myself away. I had no idea he was such a big man in the artistic world. I never could see anything in his pictures myself. Give me something with a story in it, not a splash of faded colours that look as though the brush had done it without human aid. Whatever does he aim at in his painting?"

Hilary made a valiant effort to explain, but her observations fell on deaf ears. It was a provoking habit of Mrs. Pederson's to express curiosity about things she had not the faintest interest in when they were explained to her. She broke in ruthlessly on Hilary's well-meant attempt to be lucid.

"Yes, dear, I see, though I'm not clever

enough to like it all. But now tell me what you think of Paul. I could tell you were taken with him, and it seems that he is quite a person to cultivate, though I say it as shouldn't, being his relative. We will go down to Sydenham oftener this summer."

Hilary did not reply. It seemed to her in the worst taste to be discussing one's host as soon as he was out of sight and hearing, even if he were a relative.

"I never like to pronounce an opinion after such a short acquaintance," she said sententiously.

"Gracious! you ought to be fifty, you are so cautious, my dear!" laughed Mrs. Pederson. "I don't pretend to be a person of great acumen, but I can sum up anyone at a glance. It does not take me two minutes to discover whether a man is clever and a perfect gentleman."

Hilary winced. Mrs. Pederson's habit of summing up her acquaintances as "perfect gentlemen" or "perfect ladies" always jarred upon her. Her own category did not include imperfect specimens of the type. She told herself, however, that it was altogether

absurd to take exception to Aunt Sophie's phrases. She meant nothing derogatory, and it was only fair to accept her motives as the standard of one's judgment of her.

"I enjoyed myself immensely," she said good-temperedly. "I'm ever so much obliged to you for taking me, Aunt Sophie."

"Well, it is something to be thankful for that one of my friends comes up to your standard," Mrs. Pederson replied, with a shrug of the shoulders. "It isn't often they do, if you told the honest truth."

She had not found the outing sufficiently exciting to make her loquacious, and soon dropped asleep in her corner. Hilary was quite content to be silent, though not for the same reason. The great want in her life since she left Paris had been someone to confide in, someone who could sympathise with her girlish aspirations. Madame Brun, despite her white hairs and her wrinkled cheeks, was a girl at heart, and had been confidante, counsellor and friend to her favourite. Hilary soon learned that she must not look to Aunt Sophie for the like help and sympathy in any but the most material needs. Frances might have been a comrade, but she had neither interest nor attention for

anything outside her own work. To-day Hilary felt that she had made a friend and that she would never again feel quite alone.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

FRANCES came round to Markham Square next day after luncheon. Mrs. Pederson had gone on a shopping expedition from which Hilary had excused herself on account of the heat.

"It's too hot to spend hours in a jostling crowd, buying things for which you have no earthly use," she said. "I'm sure it was good of Aunt Sophie to excuse me with such good grace, for she hates going alone."

"It will be cooler in an hour," Frances said, taking possession of her mother's armchair. "I have managed to get a leisure afternoon, and I want you to come down to Herne Hill with me to see Mona Smith. She has not been at the hospital for a couple of days, and wild horses would not keep her away if she were not too ill to come."

"I should like to, though I don't know what Aunt Sophie will say if she comes home and finds me away," Hilary replied dubiously.

"We shall be back in time for dinner,"

Frances said coolly. "I could not possibly stay longer, for Ursula and I have some work to do this evening. If I don't take care Ursula will beat me all along the line. She is splendid at some things. She does not work half as hard as I do but she will walk through the exams. with a smile."

"Aren't you too anxious, Francie?" Hilary said quickly. "You are too hard on yourself; you don't give your poor brain a chance of resting. Wouldn't it be better to forget the work now and then as Ursula does?"

"Forget! You little silly! how can people forget the only thing in the world that they really care for?" Frances shrugged her shoulders with an affectation of boredom which her flashing eyes and quivering lips belied. "You don't know all that hangs on this exam. I shall never have nerve to try again. Some students go up time after time, but I'm not made that way. If I fail, I shall throw the whole business up; and then where am I? What am I going to do with my life?"

Hilary frowned. "But why should you throw it up because you don't pass? You can try again as you say other girls do."

Frances moved her head to and fro on the cushion of her chair restlessly.

"Of course, you don't understand, and I could never make you," she said. "If I fail I shall never have nerve to try again. I lie awake at nights and think of what will become of me if I don't get through, till I feel as though I shall go out of my mind. Of course, that way madness lies, but I can't help it."

Hilary looked anxiously at her cousin's thin, worried face. She was years younger than Frances, but just now she felt immeasurably older and wiser. She knew with certainty that all this fever and anxiety were laying the foundation for the failure Frances dreaded.

"Oh, if you would not worry so much!" she sighed. "You are so clever, and you work so hard, Francie, that you are sure to pass. Promise me that you will rest more and think less about the work."

"Let me alone this afternoon, Hilary, please," Frances replied, almost angrily; "I am all jarred and out of humour. I made a mess of a dissection this morning through forgetting a mere rudiment that a beginner should have known. Don't mention the hospital to me to-day, though I shall have to

talk to Mona Smith about it. Thank goodness! here comes Mantle with some tea. Pour me out a cup and tell me what you have been doing lately. Remember, I have not seen you for a fortnight, time enough for thrilling episodes."

Hilary laughed as she handed Frances her cup.

"Events are about as plentiful as your visits, but yesterday was a red-letter day. We went out to Sydenham to see Cousin Paul. I'm inclined to quarrel with you, Frances, for keeping his existence a secret so long. He is quite the nicest person I have seen since I left Madame Brun."

"How flattering to mother and me," laughed Frances. "But the truth is, that Cousin Paul and I do not get on together, and in that case wisdom lies in mutual and amicable forgetfulness. He is as old-fashioned as the Major was, and my choice of a profession raised an impassable barrier between us. I used to spend a lot of time once at Cousin Paul's. When the atmosphere at home got electrical I always ran away to Sydenham, and if I had shown the least talent for art he would have adopted me. As it is, I disappointed him. I'm glad you have

made friends with him, Hilary," she went on in a softened tone; "there's no one on earth I reverence more than Cousin Paul, and if ever I wanted a friend, which God forfend, I would go to him first and abide by his counsel."

"Yes, I feel that already," Hilary replied quickly. "I know what you mean by his being old-fashioned, and I think that is what makes him different to other men one meets. He does not like to think of a girl working for her living, shoulder to shoulder with men, though so many must do it. He believes that some man should work for her, and that if she is in any trouble it is a man's part to protect her. It may be old-fashioned, but it is a nice thing to have at the back of one's mind, particularly when one knows that all men have not the same ideas." She was thinking of Chivers Smith and the different impression he had made on her mind. It was his opinion that a woman must take care of herself, and that if she be a little more foolish and careless than others, she must expect to be the prey of the more clever and wary.

The two girls took an omnibus to Victoria Station, and in less than an hour found themselves at Herne Hill.

Mona Smith lived in a road of small, semi-detached houses, climbing a suburban street not far from the station, somewhat pretentiously named Jamaican Avenue. The house itself was neither better nor worse than its neighbours, but it lacked the individual touch of colour and decoration which lifted many from an aspect of dreariness. The blinds were drawn up askew, and dark curtains at the windows bespoke a desire, at all costs, to avoid labour.

"It looks dingy, but the Smiths do not bother about household affairs," said Frances, as she opened the gate. "They are all at work except the children, who have not left school. There's an elder son, but he comes home so seldom that he never seems to be reckoned as one of the family. By the way, we seem to have hit on one of these festive occasions, for here he is."

Hilary looked along the tiled path, and her face flushed with surprise and annoyance. That, among the great family of Smiths with its innumerable branches, Frances' student friend and her aunt's "man of business" should belong to the same had never occurred to her. It was Chivers Smith, who came down the path, lifting his hat to the girls. Hilary passed him

with a chilling bow and followed Frances to the door.

A diminutive servant ushered the girls unannounced into an untidy front-parlour, which seemed to Hilary unpleasantly crowded and hot to suffocation. The crowd resolved itself into five persons: a stout, elderly woman, sitting in a low chair, reading a halfpenny paper; two schoolgirls with lank hair hanging about cross, tired faces; a sharp-featured, freckled little boy, catching flies on the unshaded window-pane; and the invalid, who sat huddled in a corner of the sofa, a heavy volume of physiology propped against her knees.

She got up and greeted the newcomers languidly, introduced them to the assembled family, and explained that her ailment was nothing more interesting or romantic than a cold in the head.

"It's awfully good of you to spare the time to look me up, Miss Kemsing. I know you are tremendously busy. I'm doing all I can at home, but it seems a horrible waste of time to be ill just now. Mother, it would be nice of you if you would bestir yourself to get some tea for Miss Kemsing and her friend. It is no use asking Dagmar or Betty to go and urge

Martha on, they always succeed in making her more slow and stupid than nature intended her to be. I envy you sometimes, Miss Kemsing, living in lodgings and being free from domestic worries."

"You know that you don't envy me at all in your heart, my dear Mona," said Frances, with a cheerfulness which she firmly believed was the best clinical manner. "You have a cold and are out of sorts. When you are well, you think mine a wretchedly uncomfortable existence. Please don't disturb yourself, Mrs. Smith. We cannot stay long, and we would not for worlds forestall your regular hour for tea."

"It's no trouble at all, my dear," responded Mrs. Smith graciously. "We are plain folks, but we're hospitable. I'm only sorry Smith won't be home, for he is keen to see any of Mona's grand hospital friends. Anyhow, Chivers, my eldest son, happens to be home to-day, and he'll do the honours. I shouldn't wonder if he brings in a bit of ham or something for tea. There's a cookshop close to the post-office where he has gone with his letters, and he always likes a nice tea and an early one. Chivers is quite the gentleman," she explained

confidentially. "He dines late, so naturally he prefers an early cup of tea."

She went away on household cares intent, blissfully unconscious that Mona was inwardly raging at her revelations. Mona did not mind a whit the poorness or plainness of her home, but since her life had brought her into contact with Frances Kemsing, Ursula Grantham, and many like them, she had grown ashamed of its disorder and vulgarity. Unfortunately, her revolt as yet took no other form than an occasional and captious fault-finding, which did no good but merely vexed her relatives.

She put her domestic trials aside now and eagerly questioned Frances about the lectures she had missed through her absence from the hospital. Hilary, who had no part or lot in such matters, turned to the two schoolgirls, who were staring at her with manifest interest. They knew that nearly all her life had been spent with Madame Brun, and were anxious to hear all she could tell them about her schooldays.

"Of course, Gertrude tells us things, but if you are a governess you cannot see things properly," said Betty, the elder, who was preparing for matriculation and hoped to go to

Paris as soon as the examination was over. "They don't know half the fun that goes on, and wouldn't understand it if they did. Gertrude and Mona lost all their 'go' when they took up a profession, but Dagmar and I don't mean to follow their example in that respect. We are going to work like demons, but we mean to have a good time all the same. Dag is going to Girton if she gets a scholarship, but I'm to have a couple of years at Madame Brun's and qualify for a first-rate language mistress. Madame is going to take me for Gertrude's services, so it won't cost poor old father anything. It seems rather hard on old Gertie, of course, but it was her proposition. She would not take 'No' for an answer, though we all said it was not fair on her."

"Everything that is good for one person hits someone else hard," Dagmar said, out of her deep and varied experience of genteel poverty. "But, Miss Pederson, is Madame Brun's really a nice school? Gertrude praises it no end, though she says it is rather a sleepy place, with nothing about it to rouse one's ambitions."

"I was there ten years, and there was not an unhappy day in them all," Hilary said,

speaking gently, as she always did when her thoughts turned back to the quaint old house in the quiet Paris suburb.

"Tell us everything you can remember," demanded Betty.

Hilary laughed. "That's too large an order; I could not fulfil it if I talked till midnight." She was in the full tide of reminiscences when the door opened and the elder son of the house looked in.

Chivers Smith had no illusions concerning his sisters. He knew they were clever and hardworking girls, who stood by one another and never lost sight of the fact that their futures depended on their own exertions. He knew also that he could, if he would, save them much of this grinding and worrying, but his affection was not of the kind which puts family ties before self-interest. He told himself that he had his own goal to reach, and that *he* had had to struggle at the beginning as they were doing. It had not hurt him, and it would do them no harm. Yet he was conscious of a difference in the three faces which bent towards one another over the centre table. He told himself that it was birth and breeding which gave Hilary's sweet, animated face some-

thing the others lacked; but he was wrong. She alone of the five girls lived for other things than her own advancement and her pet interests. The light of a wholesome, buoyant spirit shone in her tender, mirthful eyes. She was happy and free from all taint of depression because a life of self-renouncing love has always been a life of liberty from carking and narrowing cares.

Over the tea-table, where each scrambled for his or her own meal, Chivers Smith endeavoured, without much success, to further his acquaintance with Hilary and Frances. The elder girl had always disliked him and dreaded his influence upon her mother, whilst Hilary's recollection of their last meeting was too vivid for her to feel at ease in his presence. Both were glad when it was possible to say good-bye to Mona and her sisters and leave the house.

"I wish we had not gone to-day," Frances said discontentedly, when they were in the train. "It is the way I am usually rewarded when I exercise the virtue of self-sacrifice. There was really nothing serious the matter with Mona, and I hated to have you meet that brother of hers, Hilary. By the way, I

saw that you needed no introduction to him. Surely mother does not inscribe him on her visiting list?"

Hilary shook her head. "No, he comes on business now and then, though, perhaps, I ought not to have mentioned it. Aunt Sophie dislikes me to talk of her business affairs. He saw me going into No. 10 one day, and on the strength of that, imagined that we were acquainted. It was odious of him to try to talk to me about Aunt Sophie's business, but I suppose he did not know it was not the way in our world."

"No; perhaps not," Frances said absently, looking out of the window without seeing any of the drawbacks to the dingy little houses past which the train was whirling her.

She was wondering whether she should tell Hilary why she disliked Chivers Smith and feared his influence over her mother. She remembered that once he had been responsible for a heavy monetary loss, and that the Major had broken off all business connections with him in a summary fashion. He had also enjoined on Frances to keep her own little income out of Smith's hands. But what good could she do by raking up these doings in the past?

Hilary's money was safe, and it was not likely that Mrs. Pederson would be guided by her niece in anything relating to her own affairs. Why cast a shadow of possible evil on the path Hilary was treading? It had its difficulties already, though she trod it with radiant smiles and an undaunted courage.

Frances was still debating the point when the train drew up at the platform at Holborn Viaduct station. The opportunity for warning Hilary was gone. It was too late now to speak. She said good-bye to her cousin, and went on her way to Skone Street with a meditative frown on her dark little face.

"Well, I cannot hinder my work by bothering about other people's business," she said, as she put the latchkey in the lock of her own door. "Mother would not brook my interference for a moment, so she and Chivers Smith must go their own gait. If anything seriously affects Hilary, she shall have a corner of my diggings, and glad enough I shall be to have her."

CHAPTER VII.

THE STORM BURSTS.

SUMMER slipped into autumn, and autumn into winter, each with its widening interests and new experiences for Hilary Pederson.

Looking back, she seemed to see a great gap between the girl who had said good-bye so hopefully to Madame Brun in the dear old French school and the Hilary of Markham Square. The months had left their mark on the frank, girlish face. No one would call Hilary a childish-looking creature for her years now, as Mrs. Pederson had done eight months before. Nothing could rob her of her buoyancy and her talent for finding the bright and the amusing side of everything that happened. The joyous laugh and the merry word were as frequent as ever; but she saw sights and heard stories now which would have been meaningless to her before, and they touched her to the heart. Her character had strengthened; her mental and moral fibre had become finer and more tempered. The frank acceptance of a new phase

of life, and the nerving oneself to self-control and kindly endurance of much that goes against the grain, cannot help having a fine bracing effect on the whole nature.

Hilary found herself thrown more and more on her own resources as the weeks slipped away. If, at first, she had chafed at Aunt Sophie's perpetual call upon her time, she could do so no longer. Mrs. Pederson was more and more engrossed in interests she did not ask Hilary to share, and in which it was manifest the girl's participation would be unwelcome.

Hilary went often to Sydenham; scarcely a week passed without her visiting the studio, and it was evident that Mr. Kemsing found her presence no hindrance to his work. He liked to listen to her chatter as he painted, and in these summer and autumn months a close friendship was cemented which was to be the girl's refuge and safeguard in the dark days she had, later, to face. When the waves of a sea of perplexities threatened to sweep over her, she turned confidently to the old man whose wisdom and tolerance she had tested in the days of sunshine and prosperity.

She had other interests also above and beyond her friendship with Paul Kemsing.

Since her expedition with Ursula Grantham to Cross Street she had been there often, sometimes with Ursula, but more frequently alone.

A sister of Ursula's, the widow of a London clergyman, had taken a small house in the squalid little street, and with two or three girl friends was working amongst the poor in a quiet, practical way which fired Hilary's enthusiasm. She would have liked to join them, and hinted as much to Mrs. Devon. That wise woman gave her little encouragement.

"My dear, your duty lies in Markham Square," she said frankly. "If you ever find yourself without ties or friends who need you, we will talk about the matter. As it is, you have a duty to your aunt, and you could not expect to do any good here if you reached Cross Street through the gate of a neglected duty. Come and see us as often as you like, but nothing more for the present."

In the early spring Hilary persuaded Mrs. Pederson to let her pay Madame Brun a visit. The old French lady had been ailing all the winter, and pined for a sight of "her child."

Betty Smith travelled to Paris with her. Dagmar had won her scholarship and gone to Girton, and Betty had herself been fortunate in

gaining a "Local," and was jubilant at the thought of being able to hand back to her elder sister some of the diverted salary.

"It was hateful to think of her giving up all for me, so I was bound to work hard and try to get something," she told Hilary. "I shall find a good post when I leave Paris, and then I'll make it up to the dear old girl."

"You are very fond of Miss Smith?" Hilary said, remembering that she had once thought the second English mistress was scarcely a girl to inspire affection and that her own liking for her had been decidedly tepid.

Betty stared.

"She is my sister," she replied coolly. "It's easy to see that you have never had any folks of your own. Sisters always stick together, however much they may squabble in private. Some people say brothers do too, but I don't know anything about that. Chivers has never lived at home since I can remember, and though he might have done a lot for us, he has never troubled himself. We all think him abominably selfish, though mother sticks up for him. I say that he is selfish to the core, and I should be sorry for anyone whose

interests clashed with his. They would certainly go the wall."

Hilary looked troubled, and made haste to change the subject. Nevertheless, she could not wholly forget Betty Smith's outspoken criticisms, and they made her vaguely uneasy.

Mrs. Pederson's "man of business" had been more often in Markham Square than ever of late, and Hilary could not help attributing her aunt's worried expression and her fitfulness of temper to the frequency of these visits.

It was useless to take Frances into her confidence. Frances said plainly that she did not wish to be bothered with anyone's troubles and trials until her own were past.

Hilary blamed herself because she could not help feeling glad to be away from Markham Square for a few weeks. She hated problems and complications, and thought with relief that none would vex her while she was under Madame Brun's roof.

She was welcomed like a child of the house, and settled down into her old niche as though she had never left it. She had only three short weeks to spend in Paris, but during that time she meant to forget that she was no longer the happy, irresponsible schoolgirl.

Madame Brun soon knew all there was to tell about her darling's life in London, and guessed much that Hilary did not put into words. It was not the life she would have chosen for her but she had faith in the girl's power to walk amidst its dangers and temptations, and to resist its tendency to lower and limit her aspirations and ambitions. She believed that Hilary would be equal to all the claims upon her, the smallest and most exasperating no less than the larger and more impressive.

The girl made the most of her holiday. She wandered about the city, with old Marie, Madame's factotum, as a chaperone, as she had not been allowed to do in former days. Though she had crept into her old place in the house, Madame did not forget that she was no longer the schoolgirl, and gave her a liberty she had not enjoyed before. Sometimes she sat for hours in the window of the little room, which had been given up again to her use, the little room which had always been a haven of peace, the quietest nook in the busy house. Here all her battles had been fought, all her vexations adjusted to the line of life, all her joys tasted to the full. The old life had never seemed

so sweet and wholesome as it did when Hilary sat dreamily looking down into the old-fashioned garden.

Nature had not yet awakened from her winter sleep, and the garden was bare and brown. In another month it would don its garment of spring greenery, and look much as it had done on the day the girl said good-bye to it. She sighed a little as she recalled the small, dull garden in the square, with its groups of stunted shrubs which so soon lost their freshness. The fascination of our great city had not yet touched Hilary. She regarded it still with the eyes of a country-bred girl, and had no one to show her its historical interest, its peculiar charm and its secret beauty.

Years after, one who would never see again what he revealed to Hilary, lifted the veil for her, and she saw the most wonderful city in the world with different eyes. In her girlish ignorance she had pronounced it cruel, ugly, and dismal; he taught her to dream of ancient days in the cloisters of the Abbey, or in the seclusion of hidden courts and inns; to wander in historic places, to watch for wonders of light and shade on the riverside houses, and to love the great waterway with its burden of

mysterious freight. These things were still unknown to Hilary, and she compared Paris to her native city with scant appreciation of the latter.

A letter from Markham Square suddenly cut Hilary's holiday short.

Miss Smith was the bearer of the undesired missive. She brought it into Hilary's room one morning as the girl was putting on her hat and coat to accompany Marie on a marketing expedition.

"A letter for you, Hilary," she said, tossing it on the table and turning away.

Miss Smith had shown little friendship for Hilary since she came to Paris and was manifestly jealous of Betty's violent attachment to her.

Hilary took up the letter and glanced at the address. It was written in a laboured, unformed hand which recalled none of her few acquaintances in London. She broke the envelope and drew out its contents.

The epistle proved to be from Mantle, and Hilary's face grew grave as she read. Then she laid the sheets on her knee and considered the news they contained.

Mrs. Pederson was ill, "clean demented"

was the maid's description of her mistress's condition, and though it seemed absolutely essential she should see a doctor, she refused to have one called in. All the servants except Mantle had been sent away, and Mrs. Pederson had taken to her bed, forbidding anyone to send for Frances or let her know what was happening.

"It is evident that poor Mantle is at her wit's end and must have some help," Hilary said aloud, as she went downstairs to find Madame Brun. "She does not like to ask me to come home, but it is what she really wants me to do."

Madame looked grave when Hilary explained the situation.

"It seems a pity to shorten your holiday, *chérie*, but I think you ought to go," she said. "Let us hope you will find things not so bad as that alarming letter would lead one to fear. The poor maid is evidently greatly overwrought.'

Hilary nodded. "And that is so unlike Mantle. Under the most exciting circumstances she usually shows as much emotion as the Rock of Gibraltar. Yes, I must certainly go to the rescue as quickly as train and steamer will take me."

Hilary reached Dover at daybreak, took the next train to town, and drove straight to Markham Square. The dull rows of houses, which never rose to the day's duties with any demonstration of haste, were still shuttered as the girl ran up the familiar steps of No. 10 and rang the bell.

Mantle was astir, for she could be heard, without any delay, crossing the hall and fumbling at the lock of the entrance-door.

"Good gracious! Miss Hilary, what a time of day for you to be out; and I'll be bound you have been travelling all night!" she cried. "I'm right glad to see you, though. Come in, and I'll get you some breakfast at once."

Hilary laughed. "I travelled all night and I own to being famished," she said, as she opened the door of the dining-room. The blinds had been drawn up, and in the chill morning light she could see the dust lying thick on the furniture. Everything wore that look of forlornness an apartment always takes on when it has not been used for days. In the grate there were still the cinders of a dead fire, and a litter of torn paper lay in the fender.

"How dreary and depressing!" she cried, shivering. "I'll come down to the kitchen and have my breakfast by your fire, Mantle. I shall get the blues if I stay up here by myself. Whilst you are boiling the kettle you can tell me about Aunt Sophie's illness. Your letter alarmed me awfully."

"You won't find the place fit to sit down in, Miss Hilary," Mantle said, leading the way to the basement. "I have had my hands too full to keep any one spot clean and neat as the mistress likes it. But there, she can blame no one but herself. She it was sent off Eliza and cook at a moment's notice, and without giving a word of reason!" Mantle tossed her head, and swept to and fro with worry and indignation in every line of her angular figure.

"What do you think really ails Aunt Sophie?" Hilary asked anxiously.

Mantle paused in the act of lifting the kettle from the fire and looked at the girl significantly.

"If you ask my candid opinion, knowing mistress as well as anyone can know her, and in strict confidence between you and me, Miss Hilary, there ain't anything the matter with her at all. She's just sulking.

Somebody has done her an injury, and she is sick with vexation. All she'll say is that she's a badly injured woman, and there's them as ought to be punished for what they've brought on her, but ask her a question I dare not. She gets heaps of letters, but she tosses them unopened into the grate. You'll see a pile of them when you go up, for she won't have them touched. Maybe she will tell you all about it, though it's plain she isn't going to let Miss Frances know anything."

At this point Mrs. Pederson's voice was heard calling shrilly for Mantle, and demanding to know who was in the house and why her chocolate was delayed.

"Pour it out, Mantle, and I will carry it up," Hilary said. "She will be so surprised to see me that she may tell me her troubles on the spur of the moment."

"I wish she may," Mantle responded grimly. "For a lady with a tongue as long as the mistress, she can keep a secret uncommonly well when she likes."

Hilary threw off her hat and coat and made her way upstairs with the little tray Mantle had prepared.

There was no mistaking Mrs. Pederson's

surprise when Hilary opened the door and stepped into the room. She lifted herself upon her elbow and stared at her with astonishment not unmixed with annoyance.

"So it was your cab that I heard!" she exclaimed sharply. "What has brought you back in this hurry? Have you quarrelled with your wonderful Madame Brun, or has she tired of you?"

"Neither," said Hilary, laughing. "But it was clearly time I returned. You have taken wretched care of yourself, Aunt Sophie, and need someone to look after you. I am going to nurse you back to health. Mantle says you have not been out of your room for ten days."

"Mantle always chatters," grumbled the invalid, settling herself back on her pillows and occupying herself with the tray Hilary placed before her. She had aged wonderfully in the three weeks since Hilary had left her. There were fresh lines on her forehead and about her mouth, and her eyes had a tired, worried expression. Now and then she cast a keen, suspicious glance at her niece, as though she would have liked to ask how much Mantle had told her, and what she knew of the

circumstances it had been Mrs. Pederson's endeavour hitherto to conceal.

"Now, tell me what brought you back, Hilary," she said at length.

Hilary hesitated. "I heard that you were ill, Aunt Sophie," she said gently.

Mrs. Pederson frowned. "That was meddling Mantle! She shall leave as soon as I get about again. There is nothing the matter with me, Hilary—nothing."

"My dear aunt, what an incomprehensible statement when I find you in bed and hear you have not left it for ten days!" Hilary replied with the ghost of a smile. "You cannot expect me to think you are well."

Mrs. Pederson laughed hysterically, and then burst into a storm of sobs and tears.

"Yes, I am ill, ill in mind if not in body," she gasped. "I'm a ruined woman, Hilary—ruined, robbed, without a penny in the world. I have lost everything, so that swindler tells me, though he may be lying about that as he has done about everything else."

Hilary looked startled. "I don't understand, Aunt Sophie."

Mrs. Pederson moved irritably on the pillows.

"Gracious! Surely I am lucid enough. It does not take much sense to grasp the fact that when you have lost all your money you are just ruined, and that there is nothing but the workhouse for you. These lawyers ought to be punished when they deceive poor widows with their lying reports and their grand promises. What is the use of a man of business if you cannot trust him and follow his advice in the investing of your money?"

"Oh, Aunt Sophie, has Chivers Smith done this?" exclaimed Hilary. "Frances was always afraid of him."

"Yes, and you were never a friend to him either. You can both laugh finely at me now. It will be a joke that will last you a lifetime. But go away and send Mantle to me. It worries me to have you sit there, looking as though I were a lost soul because I happen to have made some unlucky investments, and trusted a man who turns out to be a mere swindler."

Hilary got up and went away, feeling helpless in a crisis in which she had no past experience to guide her. She wandered about the house in a state of conscious and miserable superfluousness, until she made up her mind

to write later in the day to Mr. Kemsing and beg him to come and see Aunt Sophie. Now she would go and find Frances. The student might be too much taken up with her work for ordinary calls upon her, but this was something she ought to know and to which it was essential she should give her help and advice.

CHAPTER VIII.

FRANCES REFUSES TO INTERFERE.

FRANCES had not returned from the hospital when Hilary reached Skone Street. Knowing that it was a little before her usual time, Hilary sat down to wait for her. She came in about twenty minutes later, looking cross and tired, though her face brightened when she caught sight of her visitor.

"My dear Hilary, I thought you were in Paris!" she exclaimed, tossing an armful of books on the table and shaking hands in her usual boyish fashion. "Ursula has gone to Brighton for a couple of days, so I expected to find an empty room."

She threw herself full length on the lounge and stretched her arms with a wearied gesture. The sun from the unshaded window fell full on her small, dark face, and Hilary saw that it was thinner and whiter, and that there were purple lines under the restless eyes.

"I'm getting on awfully well with my lectures just now," Frances went on, in a quick,

excited way. "You are not a student, Hilary, or you would know how glorious it feels to be in thorough working trim, to be able to grasp things easily, to feel you are just all brain and nothing is too difficult for you to tackle. I hate to seem cocksure, but there does not seem the least reason why I should not do splendidly in the finals, even if I don't take honours. In another six months you will be able to congratulate me on being thoroughly qualified, I hope."

Hilary regarded her seriously.

"I am glad you are so happy in your work, Francie, though you look awfully strained. I hate to worry you about other things."

"Do not do it, I beg," Frances said, emphatically. "I warn you that I have not a figment of interest in anyone but myself, and an earthquake would only seem a temporary disarrangement of my belongings."

"But you must detach yourself a little," urged Hilary. "Aunt Sophie is ill, Frances."

"Send for a doctor, my dear; I am not qualified to practise yet, however much I may know of disease theoretically."

"Please be serious, Frances. I want you to

come to Markham Square. Aunt Sophie is ill in mind and body, and I cannot bear all the burden of her trouble. It is heavy, I am sure, and I believe it is a money trouble."

Frances sat up, and her black brows met in a frown.

"A money trouble! What on earth do you mean, Hilary?"

Hilary hesitated. "From what Aunt Sophie says, she has lost everything. She has made bad investments, and accuses Chivers Smith of ruining her."

"That's sheer nonsense. She has nine hundred a year in her own right. She would never touch the capital, though, of course, she has the power to do so."

She crossed the room, and, with one hand on the mantelshelf, stood looking down into the empty grate.

Though she denied the possibility of her mother's being ruined with nine hundred a year at her back, she did not feel so confident of her solvency. Ever since she could remember, her mother's passion for dabbling in speculation had been a source of danger and of family discord. When the Major was alive he had held the reins tightly, and Frances knew that his

legacy to Hilary, with its condition, had really been one of his plans for safeguarding his wife from actually beggaring herself. If all else went, there was still a little she could neither squander nor throw away in wild speculation.

"If the worst comes to the worst, you have your own income, Hilary," said Frances in a hard tone. "Every family has its skeleton in the cupboard, I suppose. I wonder if you have guessed that ours is the mater's mania for dabbling in stocks and shares and business of which she knows as much as you or I do. All the women of our family are born gamblers. My grandmother has told me that when she was a girl she regularly doubled or lost her income the day after she received it. Card-playing was the fashionable vice in her day, you know. Mother has few opportunities for indulging in that direction, and in her the passion takes the form of dabbling in speculation, with Chivers Smith to egg her on. Sometimes I have thought my own keenness for work was only the spirit of gambling in disguise. I don't care about the future as Ursula does; I scarcely ever think of it. To me success in the exams. is the goal I would sell the gown off my back, de-

nounce my dearest friend, or risk life itself to win."

Hilary listened with a bewildered expression on her young face. She knew so little of life, and nothing of its seamy side. What had been mysterious and alien in her life at No. 10 she had resolutely put from her, refusing to dwell on what she could not understand.

There flashed before her mind, as she listened to Frances, a remembrance of Mrs. Pederson's passion for cards, her shrill excitement over the most childish games, her eagerness when the stakes were merely chocolates. That, then, was the stuff of which gamblers were made: she knew now why it had always repelled her.

"I can't believe it," she said slowly.

Frances shrugged her shoulders. "Disbelief does not alter facts," she said coolly.

"I have written to Cousin Paul to come and see Aunt Sophie," Hilary said.

Frances nodded. "You could not do better than follow his advice, though he is the most unworldly-wise of men. Let me know what he thinks of the business, and what mother is going to do."

"But, Frances, you are coming to Markham Square to see her?"

"My good child, how can you ask me? I can't mix myself up in the business. I have not time or attention to give at this stage. Mother must get out of her own muddles: if she had taken my advice she would never have got into them. You are all right, for your ninety pounds is safely invested and no one can touch it. You had better come and live with me."

"It is only mine so long as I live with Aunt Sophie," Hilary said thoughtfully.

"Of course, I forgot," exclaimed Frances. "That was the Major's last effort to protect poor mother from herself. It is rather hard on you, Hilary, but it relieves me a good deal. You are bound to stay with mother, and I can trust you to look after her. I must say it would have been annoying if you had taken your money and gone off to Paris, though it is what I should have done myself, I dare-say."

Hilary looked at her cousin curiously. She felt that whatever help and sympathy she and Aunt Sophie needed, they must not look to Frances to give it. Self had gradually

wrapped the girl about till it was beyond her power to care much for others. She could not give even a casual and perfunctory attention to any claims outside the radius of self-interest.

"But won't you come home with me now and see Aunt Sophie?" Hilary said wistfully.

Frances bent over her books and the colour dyed her cheeks.

"No, better not," she said, with an odd roughness in her voice. "She would not care to see me. I should only rub her up the wrong way."

"Oh, Francie, when she is in trouble! Your own mother!"

Hilary's eyes shone and her lip quivered. She could not recollect her own mother, and had only the merest scraps of knowledge concerning her, but she could imagine no claim of work or intellect, no depth of estrangement, which would have kept her from her side in sickness and trouble. When clouds gathered, it was surely the time to strengthen and draw closer the ties of blood and affection.

Frances was staring out on the forest of chimneys outlined against the grey March sky.

She felt sore and angry: with Hilary, because she saw that the younger girl was judging her by her own altruistic standard; with her mother, that she should have brought this disturbing element into her life; with herself, for a score of reasons she preferred not to define too accurately.

The opinion of others had never weighed much with Frances Kemsing. She had prided herself on being a law unto herself and beating out her own path in life. Now she was conscious of a sense of irritation at being weighed in someone's balance and found wanting. Judged by Hilary's standard, she was marked "tekel," found lacking.

Yet how impossible to explain to Hilary the gradual estrangement which made it impossible for her to feel that her mother either needed or desired her presence at this crisis in her fortunes. Relationship is a great opportunity for affection, not a compelling force. From the first, neither Mrs. Pederson nor Frances had cultivated that natural affection which exists in a child's earliest years. Little differences had been the germ of endless bickerings, and Self had been allowed to intrude perpetually. Frances, from the time she came

back, a girl of sixteen, from a German school, had never been particularly dear to her mother. She came as a disturbing element in a life which had been long regulated without regard to her existence. She was difficult to manage, wilful, and opinionated. She was unmistakably clever, but when Mrs. Pederson heard that brilliant things might be expected of her, she metaphorically wrung her hands. She disliked clever women. They never married, and they always made her feel at a disadvantage. She was good-hearted, however, and fond of the girl in her own way. She received her with open arms and determined to make the best of her.

Frances, certainly, did nothing to make this easy for her mother. She had a sharp tongue and liked to say biting things; she had, moreover, keen eyes, and every detail of her mother's daily doings passed through the crucible of her merciless criticism. Looking back in after years, Frances confessed that she must have been difficult to deal with, and singularly trying to a woman of Mrs. Pederson's character and temperament. She could readily believe that, when she announced her determination to become a lady doctor and took herself and

her belongings to Skone Street, her mother's lamentations were tempered by a sense of relief. Since that day, mother and daughter had seen little of each other, and though the estrangement remained, the bitterness had almost died out of the hearts of both. Frances, at this moment, wished heartily that she could go to her mother, sure that her presence would be welcome and her help desired. Yet no one knew better that you cannot tear down in a moment what years have laboriously built up.

"I'll come if I can by-and-bye, Hilary," she said, over her shoulder. "You may tell mother so if she inquires."

Early next morning, in response to Hilary's letter, Mr. Kemsing came to Markham Square.

Hilary was watering the ferns in the drawing-room when he was announced, and she came forward to greet him with a grateful smile.

"How good of you to come so soon, Cousin Paul!" she said, holding out her hands. "I will go and tell Aunt Sophie you are here."

"No, wait a bit, I want to hear all you know of this troublesome business first," Mr.

Kemsing said. "I never can make head or tail of Sophie's incoherent stories."

Hilary told him all she had gathered from Frances and Mantle, and the sum total agreed exactly with what the artist knew of the past.

"The best thing for me to do will be to go into the City and see this man to whom Sophie attributes her losses," he said thoughtfully. "Then I shall know exactly how matters stand and be better able to advise your aunt. You can tell her I will join her at dinner."

When he returned a few hours later, looking tired and worried, Hilary was alone in the library. Mrs. Pederson refused absolutely to see him. She was too ill to discuss business, she said; all she wanted was to be left alone, and they might manage her affairs as they pleased.

In vain Hilary protested, coaxed, and entreated. Mrs. Pederson decreed to keep her room, and her dinner was carried thither by the overworked and exasperated Mantle.

Mr. Kemsing smiled inscrutably when Hilary apologised for her aunt's absence.

"That was her way from a child," he said. "She could never be got to face a situation

which threatened to prove disagreeable. It's a species of weakness which never pays in the long run."

Hilary nodded. She did not want Cousin Paul to drop into generalising as he had a habit of doing. She was anxious to hear the result of his expedition into the City.

"Did you manage to see Chivers Smith, Cousin Paul?" she asked, as he helped her to fish. "Are things as bad as poor Aunt Sophie fears?"

Mr. Kemsing frowned, and seemed in no hurry to reply. His experiences that afternoon had not been pleasant ones, and he disliked to go over them even in thought.

"Bad! They are as bad as they well can be," he said irritably. "Everything has gone, swallowed up in some confounded company, which promised such huge dividends that ordinary common sense ought to have warned people that it was a fraud. Your aunt sold out of fairly safe concerns and put the whole of her money in it. Any man of sense and probity would have warned her against such folly, but she leaned on that rogue Smith, who, you may be sure, has not lost a penny. There's her bill to him for managing the

business for her, a cool three hundred with his commission, and another couple of hundred she borrowed awhile ago. She couldn't keep out of borrowing, it seems, though her own income was large enough to maintain her in comfort. Smith, who seems to know all her business, says that she has not a penny to meet his claims with and he means to press for a settlement. Something can be got by selling the lease of this house and by the sale of the furniture, but there is the future to think of."

Hilary listened, her eyes opened wide and her food untasted on her plate.

"What will Aunt Sophie do, Cousin Paul?" she said.

"That is a question for her to settle," he replied, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Of course, she must go to Frances, who has a small income that no one can touch. It isn't much, but two women can live on very little, I am told."

Hilary shook her head. "Frances has her work, and her money does little more than keep her and pay her hospital expenses."

"Well, we must leave them to manage that between them. It is you I am thinking of just now, my dear. Pederson left you ninety

pounds a year on condition that you lived with Sophie. If you break that condition, the money lapses to her. What do you say, Hilary, to letting it lapse and coming to live at Sydenham? It would be a bright day for me, child, when you became my adopted daughter, and it would be no loss to you from a pecuniary point of view. I have enough for us both and to spare." He looked across the table with a kindly smile and a manifest affection which touched the girl to the heart. Her eyes filled with tears and her lip quivered. The prospect the old artist held out was a tempting one. She knew so well what life in the quiet old house was like: the cultured ease, the companionship of clever and well-bred people, the influence of art and books—all these would be part of her daily life. On the other hand was the limited existence which would be possible for her and Mrs. Pederson on ninety pounds a year. She was sorely tempted to accept Cousin Paul's offer, the more as she felt that Aunt Sophie would perhaps prefer it, since it gave her uncontrolled use of the legacy Hilary would give up.

Something Frances had let drop checked her. The Major had left this money so guarded

that it might not be in Aunt Sophie's power to lose it. He trusted her to the girl's care, and she could not be unfaithful to that trust though she had never desired it.

"I can't come, though I should like it above everything, Cousin Paul," she said slowly. "I must not desert poor Aunt Sophie in her trouble. Please, do not be vexed or think me ungrateful."

Mr. Kemsing was vexed and he did not conceal it. He was used to having his own way, and liked as little to be thwarted as Mrs. Pederson did. "Your aunt has no right to expect you practically to sacrifice yourself to her, child, and I don't doubt she would rather have the ninety pounds than your company with a share in it. You had better come to me."

He was fond of the bright, winsome girl, and was keenly anxious to spare her the life of pinching poverty which lay before her.

Yet as he strode up and down the room, he was bound to confess that he would have been disappointed if Hilary had embraced his offer. She would have fallen in his esteem if she had put Self first and left the fretful, disappointed woman upstairs to complete her own ruin.

He stopped in his walking to and fro and laid his hands heavily on the girl's shoulders.

"Of course, you must have your own way, you foolish girl."

Hilary laughed. "That's tantamount to saying that you know I am right, Cousin Paul."

"I don't say yes or no," he replied testily. "I can see that you are going to be horridly uncomfortable. I have had glimpses of the life you will have to lead, and it baffles description. I would have saved you from it if you would have let me. If you won't leave Sophie, I see no other way to help you." He did actually see another way, but even for Hilary's sake he could not bring himself to mention it. He might have offered to both the shelter of his home, but he could not make so big a sacrifice. A man, he said, must have peace and quiet in his old age, and Mrs. Pederson's presence at The Nook would make work and serenity a sheer impossibility.

"There is no other way," he repeated. "But remember, child, if you ever come to a rough place, you are to send for me. If ever you need money, write me a line, and I will sell my last curio, if need be, to get it. Promise

to remember old Paul Kemsing if you want help or a home."

Hilary promised readily enough. She knew that he was sincere in his desire to help her, and there was no one on earth to whom she would go so willingly. She determined, however, that it should be only as a last resource. Surely she and Aunt Sophie would manage easily enough, without needing assistance. To Hilary, who had never needed to know the price of a meal, or gauged the cost of merely living, ninety pounds a year seemed a sum of enormous proportions.

CHAPTER IX.

A STEP DOWN IN THE WORLD.

"I DON'T mind being poor, Aunt Sophie. It is not half so bad as people make out. Having less fashionable clothes and a more meagre table can't really affect one's peace of mind. We can be quite happy together in some quiet little place." Hilary delivered these sentiments with the air of one who had tested the hollowness of prosperity and yearned for the bracing atmosphere of adversity.

Mrs. Pederson regarded her with speechless exasperation.

"Happy! living like rats in a hole!" she cried impatiently. "You do not know what you are talking about, girl." She was still keeping her room, more because it gave her a legitimate excuse for refusing to see Chivers Smith when he called, than because she was actually ailing.

"I know what you are thinking of—a cottage in a wood and all that sort of thing—but undiluted country I never could nor will

stand. I can't exist far away from the shops and all that makes life worth anything. I should lose health and spirits entirely. You must see that, Hilary."

"Yes," Hilary said, looking as though she did not see at all.

She was standing, her slight figure erect, her chin uplifted, her eyes on the daffodils she was arranging in a quaint brown jar on the mantelshelf. There was something so uncompromising in her attitude and in the silence she maintained that Mrs. Pederson frowned apprehensively.

"If you want to make a regular centurion's servant of me, Hilary, to be at your beck and call and to do just what pleases you, I would rather go straight to the workhouse," she said, her voice quavering ominously. "It's hard at my time of life to be governed by a chit like you. It isn't generous of you either, Hilary. If you happened to be dependent on me, I would not make it a handle to force you to do things you did not like."

Hilary flushed and bit her lip. She remembered that she had used just those words herself on the day on which her uncle's legacy had been announced to her. She was doing

the very thing she had declared then would be altogether impossible to her. Though she felt perfectly certain that what she purposed was quite the best course, she was conscious that it was not on that account any easier and pleasanter for her aunt. She felt the humiliation of Mrs. Pederson's position and the ungraciousness of her own keenly.

She looked compunctorily at the querulous face which had aged so much during the last few weeks.

"Poor Aunt Sophie!" she said gently. "You shall go wherever you like. If you are anxious to stay in London, I have no doubt it can be managed."

Mrs. Pederson accepted Hilary's assurances without any show of gratitude. Indeed, she saw no need to be grateful. She regarded Hilary's little income as a certainty which she had a right to share. Since it had been left to the girl by the Major, it had actually been taken from herself. It was mere justice that in her extremity it should go to maintain her.

The six weeks that followed were wretched ones. To Hilary they passed like a nightmare. Mr. Kemsing came and went, settling affairs with Chivers Smith, arranging for the sale of

the furniture and the disposal of the lease or the house. There were still a thousand and one anxieties and difficulties that Hilary and Mantle had to face as best they might. Mrs. Pederson refused to be consulted or to discuss the smallest detail.

"Do just as you like; I'm only a pensioner on your bounty now, Hilary, and past caring," she said, with a show of resignation. "If I have to live in sordid poverty, the details do not matter."

She reserved the right to criticise still, and Hilary's good-temper was tried to the uttermost by a continual fire of the most unreasonable fault-finding.

"Mistress was always a hole-picker, and trouble exaggerates a body's weak points," Mantle said. "You just do as I do, Miss Hilary: hear all she has to say without a word and then do what you think best. She never notices, and it saves a lot of argufying."

Mantle would gladly have gone with her old mistress, but Hilary could not afford to take her. The calculations she had gone into with Cousin Paul had shown her the limits of ninety pounds a year. The tiny house her inexperience had pictured, or the still smaller flat,

were quite beyond her means, and she wearied herself vainly in viewing lodgings seductively advertised in the daily papers.

At last she fell in with a suggestion that she should go and see rooms in a cheap boarding-house kept by a cousin of Mantle's. Mrs. Bateson, the old servant assured Hilary, was a kind-hearted woman and would do her best for the ladies, though her best would be very different to anything to which they had been accustomed.

"I've spoken to her often about you, and I know she would be willing to do things reasonable for my sake," she said. "You won't get anything cheaper in London with comfort, and company will make it livelier for mistress. She would be moped to death in lodgings."

Hilary went that afternoon to find "Bateson's Select Boarding Establishment," and to arrange, if possible, for their removal there.

It proved to be one of a row of dingy, dilapidated houses in a dull street off the Kennington Road. A flight of hollowed and unwashed steps led to the door, and as Hilary entered she was assailed by a pungent scent of frying fish.

A sulky maid ushered her into a small sitting-

room, which opened on a verandah crowded with languid geraniums just recovering from a winter's neglect and crushed-looking tulips in fancy pots.

She was studying this well-meant attempt at a winter garden when the door opened and a smiling little woman, very stout and manifestly suffering from her rapid ascent of the kitchen stairs, bustled into the room. She was dressed in a black gown, with a startling design of blue roses printed upon it, the bodice of which creaked ominously as she settled herself in a low chair and prepared to discuss business with the young lady.

"You'll like to see the rooms?" she said gaily, after a little conversation, ostensibly devoted to Hilary's business, but into which she had managed to import a large part of her own family history and a eulogistic recommendation of "Bateson's Select."

"Select it has always been and select it is going to be so long as I hold the reins," she said, nodding emphatically. "Bateson's last words to me, poor man, were not to let the house down whatever it cost me. Anyone can let lodgings, said he, but it means talent and selection to keep a boarding-house. Liberal

table, the nicest company, quite the family life —that is what you will find here, my dear— quite the family life."

She conducted Hilary up two flights of stairs and opened the door of a good-sized room, rather meagrely furnished, but airy and facing the south. It was far more comfortable than Hilary had dared to expect from the condition of the rest of the house.

She expressed her satisfaction, and followed Mrs. Bateson, who insisted that she must see the drawing-room or she would have no idea of the pleasant family life the boarders lived.

"After dinner we always gather in the drawing-room for a little music and conversation —so cosy and homely, you know," she said, smiling expansively and furtively rubbing her hot hands. "From what Miss Mantle tells me, your aunt will be one to appreciate the flow of wit and the social charm."

Hilary, with a little smile curving the corners of her mouth, assented. The boarding-house would at least afford a certain measure of amusement.

The drawing-room was a large room, pretentiously furnished, in which every article seemed to be out of repair or crying out for

renovation. Sentimental oleographs adorned the discoloured walls, the blinds were torn and dingy and the sofas were covered with a worn rep, the dazzling blue of which had been mercifully dimmed by time and the boarders of many seasons.

Two or three elderly ladies were gathered about a small table which was spread with a much-chipped tea equipage, and at the piano an angular, red-haired woman of thirty or so was plaintively informing some "birdie" invisible that she had a cage all ready for his occupancy.

On Mrs. Bateson's entrance she stopped in her appeal for his immediate acceptance of her offer and wheeled round on the music-stool.

"Another boarder, Mrs. Bateson?" she asked, eyeing Hilary inquisitively. "Please introduce me. I daresay Mrs. Bateson has told you that we are quite one family," she said, turning to Hilary with a little giggle.

"It's not quite settled, Miss Heckler," Mrs. Bateson said impressively; "I'm just showing Miss Pederson the house, and hoping she will decide to come to us. Miss Pederson and her aunt will be quite acquisitions, if I may say so. Miss Pederson has spent a lifetime abroad, and

is quite the travelled young lady, and used to the best society, quite the best."

Hilary coloured at this advertisement of her advantages and retreated to the door, telling Mrs. Bateson she was pressed for time, and would decide to take the rooms without seeing anything further.

Away from Mrs. Bateson, with her fat, shining face, her odd manner, and her unmistakable kindness, it was not so easy for Hilary to see the brighter side of this new phase of existence upon which she was entering. It seemed impossible that she, Hilary Pederson, Madame Brun's favourite pupil, the idol of the school, whose whole life and training had been so alien to what was vulgar and commonplace, should be going to form one of the "family" under Mrs. Bateson's roof. It was an adjustment of herself to circumstances which could not be made all at once.

A few days later Mrs. Pederson and Hilary left Markham Square.

At the last Mrs. Pederson became pleasantly excited by the prospect Hilary's description of the boarding-house presented to her imagination. She had been terribly afraid of life alone with Hilary in small and third-rate lodgings. On

a large stage it is possible to live one's life without interfering with others; but on a limited one, community of interest is essential for mutual comfort. Mrs. Pederson sometimes felt that Hilary was too uncompromising and breathed an air too rarefied for her.

Hilary never forgot that first evening at Mrs. Bateson's—the overheated dining-room, the clatter of plates, and the noise of many people eating. She looked, with a sinking of heart, down the long table with its soiled cloth, its smeared glasses, its steaming joints, and turned away with something like nausea from the great plate of food thrust over her shoulder by an awkward and ill-tempered maid who wore a dirty cap and had an unpleasant habit of snorting as she moved.

Her seat was next to Mrs. Bateson, whilst opposite sat a young man, with a florid complexion above an expansive shirt-front, in which was embedded a huge imitation ruby.

He stared at her with manifest admiration, endeavoured to set her at her ease by some chaffing remark, and then continued his conversation with his neighbour.

"He's an insurance agent in quite a big way," whispered Mrs. Bateson; "and quite

the gentleman is Mr. Bradbrook, for all he is so free. Miss Bird would not talk to him if he were not vastly agreeable. She is a lady journalist, immensely clever, I'm told, and very exclusive."

Hilary nodded and scrutinised the exclusive Miss Bird, who was certainly more interesting than the insurance agent. She was a yellow-haired, pale little woman, with a thin, mobile face which reminded Hilary of Frances, and an amusing way of expressing herself on the most ordinary subjects.

Mrs. Pederson was already deep in conversation with a showily dressed elderly lady with a Jewish cast of countenance, and was evidently enjoying her position. Hilary blamed herself for feeling forlorn and out of place, and hoped that to-morrow would find her less tired and captious.

The dinner ended at last, and with the exception of Miss Bird, who had to report a meeting in the West End, the whole party trooped to the drawing-room, to wile away the next hour with a great deal of loud music and as much animated conversation. Each member contributed his or her quota of gossip, good-natured or otherwise, which was tossed

from one to another, mangled and patched and worried, till its owner scarcely recognised it as her own.

Hilary soon made her escape.

"It is quite clear," she said as she climbed the steep staircase, lit by a flaring gas-jet, "that one has to become acclimatised to 'Bateson's Select Establishment.' I wonder what Frances or Ursula would say if they could see us at this stage of our fortunes."

CHAPTER X.

"BATESON'S SELECT BOARDING ESTABLISHMENT."

It was a strange kind of life Hilary lived for the next few months under Mrs. Bateson's roof. It was full of change and had its amusing features, but Hilary soon found herself too busy to notice peculiarities or to mind much the things which had at first jarred upon her. Mrs. Pederson made great demands upon her time, and it was not long before Mrs. Bateson and the boarders discovered that she was deft, and willing to please them by the performance of small services.

She was a favourite with them all, and in her turn liked those with whom she was bound to associate, though she might never have chosen them as companions. There was nothing mean and spiteful about them, and they were kind to the girl, making much of her when she came into the drawing-room or accepted an invitation to their rooms to give her opinion upon some point of private or personal interest.

The young men called her "stand-off," and were a little afraid of her. They could not "chaff" her as they did Miss Heckler and the knot of telegraph girls who had a corner table to themselves at dinner and kept up a bubble of laughter and shrill-voiced conversation. They did not appear to mind in the least the smeary silver and the stained knives which made Hilary shudder, and treated a failure in the culinary department as an excellent joke.

There had been efforts towards improvement in many directions since the arrival of Mrs. and Miss Pederson. Hilary never criticised, to be sure, but her very difference from those about her was a daily criticism, though she was not the least conscious of it.

Somewhat to Hilary's surprise, Mrs. Pederson was pleased with her new surroundings. There were times when she lamented loudly the life she had left behind her, when she was so irritable that Hilary scarcely dared to address her, yet she indubitably enjoyed the boarding-house life which to Hilary seemed such a poor makeshift for home.

Mrs. Pederson delighted in the distinction she enjoyed as one who had descended from a higher sphere than those about her ever dreamed

of entering. She liked to entertain little groups of ladies with stories of the luxuries and conveniences with which No. 10, Markham Square, had been replete. Its charms gained enchantment the farther they receded into the past, till Hilary scarcely recognised in her aunt's descriptions the dull, commonplace house in which she had spent so many dull, commonplace months.

She was glad, however, that her aunt should be happy and amused, though she might think the method in the worst taste. It made her own life decidedly easier. In a good humour, Mrs. Pederson was kind-hearted and amusing, but if anything put her out, the atmosphere about her became electrical, and the most well-meant efforts to propitiate her were apt to be misconstrued.

There came a day when Hilary saw that even boarding with Mrs. Bateson was a more elaborate scheme of life than their scanty income would stretch to. It became increasingly difficult to meet Mrs. Bateson's modest weekly bills, and the margin for absolute necessaries grew smaller and smaller. Hilary's own gowns were threadbare, and there seemed no prospect of her being able to replace them. She pored

over her little account book till her eyes and her back ached, but the balance remained obstinately on the wrong side.

It was futile to consult Mrs. Pederson. Discussions on financial matters always provoked an attack of hysteria, in which Hilary's management was wildly denounced and her own economy pointed to as a burning example.

Hilary secretly regarded her aunt's economy as a figment of her imagination; it was built upon a few axioms which Mrs. Pederson believed to be as infallible as truth itself. She guided her own expenditure by them, and no sage living would have convinced her that it was not always "cheapest in the long run" to buy the most expensive articles on the market.

"The best is always cheapest in the long run," she would say firmly, when Hilary tried to convince her that if you have only ten shillings in hand, it was unwise to spend seven of them on lavender gloves or a delicate thing in chiffon boas.

If Hilary hinted that their purse was getting empty Mrs. Pederson was always quick to express her readiness to find money, a step Hilary never failed to combat with all her force. She knew what lay behind the suggestion.

Mrs. Pederson had promised never again to have any business relations with Chivers Smith, and it was her way of asking her niece to release her from that promise. Hilary told herself that she would rather beg her bread in the street than borrow money of Chivers Smith, or consent to her aunt entering the dingy little office in Chancery Lane.

Not that Hilary had lost faith in the world or herself. She thought it would be a strange thing if she could not find some means of adding to her small income.

She sat at the table one May morning, slowly disposing of a breakfast chilled by long waiting. She was alone, for the boarders had breakfasted half an hour before and gone their several ways. The stillness of the house was only broken by the tapping of Sarah's broom as she swept the stairs, and the cheery voice of Mrs. Bateson spurring the heavy and reluctant boot-boy to his duties. Hilary's own breakfast was delayed by the necessity for waiting upon her aunt, who took her matutinal meal in her own room, and felt neglected unless Hilary made frequent pilgrimages up the four flights of steps to replenish her tray.

A newspaper was propped against the coffee-

pot, and Hilary, whose meal was not of that luxurious kind which demands the whole attention, divided hers impartially between its columns and her cup of cold coffee. There was a glimmer of a smile in her blue eyes as they went steadily down the long list of advertisements. So many things amused her which other people found the grimmest commonplace.

"To reduce personal vanity, begin to enumerate your capabilities and accomplishments with a view to earning your daily bread," she said aloud. "I give the recipe gratis to anyone it may concern. If I were gifted with the qualifications necessary to a thorough cook or a scullery-maid, or a 'cutter,' whatever that may be, I should find myself a pearl of great price to some needy advertiser. As it is, I am simply staggered by my own ineptitude."

She threw down the paper with a rueful laugh and leaned her chin in the palms of her hands.

"I'm determined to do something — but what?" she said thoughtfully. "It ought to be something which did not take me from home very long, for Aunt Sophie would dislike that awfully."

She pushed back her chair, and was folding

the paper when Mrs. Bateson came into the room.

"Don't you hurry over your breakfast, my dear," she said. "It isn't the least bit of consequence how long you sit if you don't mind carrying your cup and plate down to the kitchen when you have done. It's more than I dare ask Sarah to clear the table twice in a morning." She sat down in a chair and wiped her heated brow with a not over-clean handkerchief. She laboured under an unconquerable tendency to get physically warm, and the climb from the kitchen to the dining-room was a steep one.

"It is the stairs that try me, dear," she said, fanning herself. "I hope you will never get stout, though some people don't seem to feel their fat like I do. I wanted to ask you whether you would mind going round to the butcher's for me this morning. Mrs. Moss has sent down to say she feels a bit poorly, and thinks a sweetbread for her lunch would do her good. They are dreadfully expensive, but I always like to please the boarders if it lies in my power; it is only what one ought to do, of course." Mrs. Bateson was one of those kindly creatures who want everybody to have the best of everything, and she did not

mind struggling and pinching herself to get it for them.

"What have you been reading, my dear? Any news about the Royal family? I seldom get a minute to look at the papers, and the gentlemen always expect you to be able to talk about what is going on. I get Miss Heckler to give me hints, for she just soaks herself in the daily papers. It is about all she has to do, poor thing. When I'm torn in two with work I do envy her a bit; but, after all, she has a deal duller life than I have, when all's said and done."

"And how much less useful, dear Mrs. Bateson!" Hilary said affectionately. She was fond of the little, hardworked, ever-cheerful landlady, who had been a good friend to her during the past seven months. "I was not reading the news this morning, but the dry advertisement columns," she added, laughing. "It has come to this, Mrs. Bateson: I must try to earn a little money somehow."

Mrs. Bateson nodded. "To be sure, ladies do it everywhere nowadays, and very wise they are. I suppose you will look for some teaching, my dear—a morning's job that would give you a bit of time to yourself?"

Hilary shook her head. "I feel as though I would rather do anything else." She moved to the window and stood looking out. "I'm not clever, you see, and I have no accomplishments. I can talk French and German because I have been abroad so long, but no one seems to crave for such services as I can render, though I've searched the columns with the eyes of a hawk."

"You have patience, my dear; one paper is nothing. I'll send William out for another paper, and we will look through it together when I have a moment to spare. I must go down to the kitchen now and arrange about the dishes for luncheon and dinner. What a comfort it is to think that in heaven there won't be any eating and drinking."

Hilary laughed. "And I must run up to Aunt Sophie, who will be waiting for her can of hot water. Shall I dust the drawing-room for you, and mend those tablecloths, when I come down?"

"My dear, you are too kind! Sarah is no good as a housemaid when it comes to darning. I had to sit up till midnight last night mending, for Mrs. Moss said that the place looked like a ragbag."

"Rude old creature!" cried Hilary. "Leave the tablecloths to me, and woe betide her if she finds fault with anything in my presence."

Mrs. Bateson thanked her gratefully, and went off to discuss with the cook the simple dishes which appeared on the menu-cards under highly decorative names, spelt with a freedom which was certainly more entertaining than informative.

CHAPTER XI.

"WHAT BECAME OF THE SOVEREIGNS?"

MRS. PEDERSON had not been the same woman since the change in her fortunes. The low fever into which she had fretted herself, and which clung to her for some weeks after she came to Tozer Street, had left her weak and irritable. She was subject to fits of nervous depression, and had lost much of her vivacity. Her dark eyes no longer flashed and glittered, and an expression of peevishness and discontent had settled upon her long, thin face, whilst her conversation, when alone with Hilary, was usually made up of complaint and reproach.

She was moving about the bedroom restlessly when her niece opened the door. Her hat and coat lay on a chair, and she was stretching a pair of white doeskin gloves as she walked up and down.

"Why, Aunt Sophie, you are dressed an hour before your usual time," Hilary said cheerfully. "Do you feel so much better this morning? I expected you would be still in bed."

"Nonsense! my watch points to ten o'clock, and I never lie after that," Mrs. Pederson said sharply. "You have been gossiping with Mrs. Bateson, I suppose, and did not notice the time. I had to ring and ask Sarah to bring me up my hot water, and a great fuss she made about it. As though we did not pay for attention and that sort of thing!"

"We pay very little, you know," Hilary reminded her. "Mrs. Bateson naturally expects us to give as little trouble as we can."

Mrs. Pederson shrugged her shoulders and set her bangles jingling.

"I don't trouble myself about Mrs. Bateson's expectations, and you need not do so either. Wait till I can make a little money, and we will leave her and find a more select place." She stopped, and glanced furtively at Hilary. The girl was looking at her with a little perpendicular line between her dark eyebrows.

"For goodness' sake, don't stare at me as though I were an antediluvian monster, girl," she said tartly. "Help me into my coat. I am going out to do some shopping before the counters get crowded. Give me a couple of pounds—that will be as much as I shall need."

Hilary's lips tightened. She had only a

very few pounds in her purse, and it would be many weeks before her dividends were due. She would be obliged to refuse her aunt, and it was a proceeding which past experience had made her unwilling to repeat.

"Must you really have the money, Aunt Sophie?" she said hesitatingly. "We can spare it very badly for anything but actual necessities."

Mrs. Pederson turned from the glass where she was arranging her veil over her grey fringe.

"Of course I must have it, or you may be sure I should not ask," she said. "I'm sick of having you hold the purse-strings, Hilary. It's humiliating to me at my time of life. Next quarter when the dividends come you must make up your mind to hand them over to me. After all, it is really my money, though your uncle, for some silly reason, thought he must leave you independent."

Hilary sighed impatiently. She was so tired of this oft-repeated taunt, and if it had not been that she had promised Cousin Paul to keep her purse in her own hands, she would long ago have allowed Mrs. Pederson to manage or mismanage their joint income as she pleased.

"When the dividends come they will nearly all have to go to Mrs. Bateson. We shall be heavily in her debt," she said wearily.

"That woman is a regular leech!" exclaimed Mrs. Pederson. "Seventy pounds a year for the miserable meals and the dirty rooms she gives us! It's ridiculous. If I only had a little capital I would start a boarding-house myself and grow rich on it."

"Much or little, it is more than we shall be able to continue to pay, Aunt Sophie," Hilary replied, taking her purse out of her pocket and emptying the contents on the dressing-table.

"That has to last us nearly three months," she said, pointing to the three sovereigns, the few shillings, and the pile of coppers.

Mrs. Pederson paused in the act of putting on her hat and glanced at the small sum which represented their available income.

"Gracious! what a muddler you must be, Hilary!" she ejaculated.

Hilary flushed. A sharp retort rose to her lips, but she had learnt that the best defence at such times was not to answer a word.

Mrs. Pederson watched her petulantly as she moved about the room, making the bed, sweeping the litter into the grate, and dusting the

ornaments. It was manifest that, as far as Hilary was concerned, the conversation was closed.

Suddenly Mrs. Pederson dropped into a chair and, after her wont when thwarted, began to weep boisterously.

"It's hard, hard, hard to be brought to poverty at my time of life. Nobody ever guessed it would happen when I married your Uncle Pederson, Hilary," she gasped between her sobs. "There were many envied me that day, I can tell you. I never knew what it was to want a pound in my life, and now, to think only a few paltry shillings stand between me and want."

"It is not quite so bad as that," Hilary said patiently. "We shall not want at all if we are careful." She might have reminded this victim of outrageous fortune that her woes were of her own manufacture, and that foolishness, and not misfortune, had brought her to her present condition.

The torrent of Mrs. Pederson's woe was soon assuaged. She remembered that she was going out, and glanced furtively into the mirror to see what ravages her tears had wrought on her thin, grey face.

"You mean well, Hilary," she said magnanimously. "I don't forget that you pulled me through this trouble when Frances chose to leave her sick mother to do the best she could. We won't worry. Who knows how soon my ship may come home and we shall have enough to live comfortably on." She nodded significantly, and wiped her eyes on a lace-edged handkerchief which belonged to Hilary.

The girl stopped, duster in hand, and looked at her aunt apprehensively.

"What do you mean, Aunt Sophie?" she asked quickly. "You have no ship to come home, to use your own metaphor. You cannot, you surely cannot have been letting Chivers Smith persuade you to speculate again." Her memory went swiftly back to various occasions when her aunt had borrowed a pound or two and gone out, ostensibly to shop, but had brought nothing back with her for her outlay.

Mrs. Pederson flushed, and flung open the window, saying that she was stifling for want of space to breathe in.

"Why should you think I have been speculating again?" she asked sharply. "Isn't there a proverb that the burnt child dreads the fire? Surely I may have reason to hope that

"'Another boarder, Mrs. Bateson?' she asked, eyeing Hilary inquisitively" (*p.* 130).

some of the money I sunk in that wretched gold mine will come back some day? Don't harbour suspicions, Hilary; only horrid people are mistrustful. Now, run down and see if you can get me a cup of tea, there's a good child. All this excitement has given me a violent headache."

Hilary departed somewhat unwillingly. Mrs. Pederson's predilection for tea at unwonted hours was a bone of contention in the kitchen. She went down the stairs thoughtfully. Her aunt's explanation had not convinced her in the least, and she was certain that Mrs. Pederson's promise not to dabble again in business had been broken.

"It's no use asking Sarah for hot water now, she will have the stove filled with saucepans," she said aloud. "I will fetch a kettle, and ask Mrs. Moss to let me boil some water on her gas-stove."

Mrs. Moss was always pleased to grant the girl this favour. It gave her a few minutes of Hilary's company and made a spot of brightness in a day that was uniformly drab.

This morning Hilary found her deep in the consideration of a new cap, and her knock at the door was hailed as most opportune. She

could give her advice whilst the kettle boiled.

The purchase of a new cap was an event in the life of Mrs. Moss, and the respective merits of turquoise with pearl and old lace with myrtle green velvet had to be carefully weighed.

It was ten minutes before the girl could make her escape without an appearance of undue haste.

She hurried upstairs and entered the bedroom with an apology for her tardiness on her lips.

The room was empty. One glance towards the wardrobe told her that Mrs. Pederson's coat and sunshade were gone.

"How mean of her, after giving me the trouble to make tea!" she exclaimed hotly, setting the tray down on the chest of drawers and looking round her.

Then her colour faded, and she darted to the table. She had left her little store of money there, and the sovereigns were gone!

She dropped into a chair, and leaning her head on her hands shed the bitterest tears she had shed in her young life.

Mrs. Pederson did not return until the gong

had sounded for dinner, and Hilary, ready dressed, was coming down the stairs.

The girl passed her with the ghost of a smile. She could not speak to her yet, though had made up her mind not to allude to her loss. She had thought the matter out as she sat darning the tablecloths in Mrs. Bateson's stuffy little back room.

She would find a situation somewhere in the country, somewhere too far away from town for Aunt Sophie to be tempted by Chivers Smith to embark in wild speculations, and where she would not be constantly reminded of her lessened means. It would be hard work to persuade her to leave London, but Hilary meant to achieve it. She felt she was right, and flattered herself that she could make her aunt also see the wisdom of the step.

"And you will be doing the right thing, my dear, I agree," said Mrs. Bateson, to whom she expounded her views and laid bare her plans. "London's a place full of temptations if you have not much money; but it will be like losing the sunshine of the house to lose you. There's never been such peace and harmony under this roof as since you came. It is that knack you have of making folks feel pleased with them-

selves. The boarders don't grumble half so much as they did; and as for Sarah, it's quite comfortable to live with her. But there, I shouldn't say a word; I'm a selfish woman even to mention my own loss when it's clearly for the best. We'll look in the paper for a nice easy place in the country for you; it'll be time enough to upset Mrs. Pederson when that's found."

As the girl was going up to her own room later in the evening Mrs. Bateson opened the sitting-room door and called her softly.

"Are you too tired to come in a minute, my dear?" she said, excitedly waving a copy of a weekly literary paper to which Miss Bird subscribed. "I believe there is something here which would exactly suit you."

Hilary followed her into the back room and Mrs. Bateson shut the door.

"I just took up Miss Bird's paper when she went out to-night and caught my eye on this," she said, pointing to a paragraph at the head of the short column. "You're half a French and German girl, and this ought to suit you to the ground, as Mr. Bradbrook says."

Hilary took the paper and read the advertisement carefully. A literary man, temporarily

forbidden to use his eyes, wanted a secretary able to read French and German fluently, for literary purposes. Further particulars were to be had by applying personally to Mr. Hilder, Fairmead, Meadham, Hertfordshire.

Nothing could have sounded more attractive to the girl, and it was the first advertisement she had seen which made her one qualification a condition.

"It's the very thing I should like," she said reflectively.

"Yes, the exact thing," nodded Mrs. Bateson. "You must apply at once, my dear. It's a pity they say 'apply personally,' for it will be a journey, and a railway fare is expensive. For all that, you must go right off to-morrow morning. I'll see that Mrs. Pederson wants for nothing while you are gone. I believe it will turn out the very thing, or why should my eyes have lit on a paragraph in a paper I don't look at once in a twelvemonth? It's just a leading, Miss Hilary, and you go to Meadham the first thing in the morning."

"If I get the post I shall owe it to you, dear Mrs. Bateson," Hilary said, putting her arm affectionately round the stout shoulder.

over which the smart gown strained ominously. "I shall never forget what a friend you have been to me all these months."

The kind little woman sniffed audibly and wiped her damp forehead.

"Don't you say nothing of that, Miss Hilary. I would gladly keep you and your aunt for nothing if I could afford it. You're a real ray of sunshine, and you give the air of distinction to the table, too. If the boarders were all like you it would be a pleasure to keep up the establishment; but there, if you want to find politeness and consideration you must look for them in a class above the Hecklers and Mosses and such like who, poor things, don't know any better. Bateson always voted Conservative because, he said, the most tip-top people he knew were the pleasantest to deal with. As I often told him, the rest meant no harm; but if you are very near the mud, you like to keep calling out you are not in it, or how are folks to know? My motto has always been, take people as you find them and believe that they mostly mean well."

CHAPTER XII.

HILARY TAKES HER OWN WAY.

VERY early next morning Hilary got up, dressed herself carefully in a fresh white blouse, brushed her shabby serge skirt, and ran downstairs. It was scarcely seven o'clock, and none of the boarders were yet astir. Sarah was sleepily sweeping the front steps, and stopped with broom suspended to stare at the girl.

"My word! you're an early bird, miss," she exclaimed. "I'm sure I would not leave my bed an hour before I need, if I were in your shoes."

"I'm going into the country this morning, Sarah. It will be lovely there this fine day, won't it? I wonder if cook could give me a cup of coffee at once if I went down to her. I want to catch the 9.15 from St. Pancras."

"If you can wait till I've finished these steps, miss, I'll go down and fetch it myself," said Sarah. "I daresay cook will be preparing our breakfasts." Sarah had a reputation among the boarders for disobligingness, but she never

hesitated to take a little trouble for Miss Pederson.

"And if you would not mind taking my aunt some hot water at nine o'clock, I should have a heart at ease, Sarah," Hilary said pleasantly. "She will be sure to miss me when she wants to get up."

Sarah agreed, though without any enthusiasm. She disliked waiting on Mrs. Pederson, who was seldom satisfied with any service rendered her.

It was a brilliant May morning, with a foretaste of summer in the warm spring wind and in the clear blue sky. Even in Tozer Street the air was fresh, and the sickly plants on the window-sills looked less depressed than was their wont.

Hilary had seen nothing of rural England, and as the train swept through the country, leaving behind it the suburbs of the great city, whirling past undulating meadows, wooded slopes, cool and green in the early morning sunlight, she looked from the window with unconcealed delight. It was a little more than an hour's run to Meadham, a tiny, sleepy village, nestling amid stretches of farm-lands, seemingly unheedful of the bustle and business of the big town scarcely a couple of miles away. The

little wayside station was a mile from the village, and the country folk were quite content that it should be so. They did not want its smoke and its shrill whistle breaking their peace day and night. So long as the train was there when they wanted to go into Bishop's Merton, that was all they asked. What was a mile to men and women who walked three times that distance to their daily toil?

How clean and sweet the whole neighbourhood seemed to Hilary as she left the station and set out to walk to Meadham. In London parks the first tiny leaves on the lime-trees were just bursting their pointed sheaths. Here the brown boughs were draped with greenery and the hedgerows white with blackthorn. A river gurgled somewhere out of sight, and there was a hum of bees busy among the early wild flowers. The air rang with innumerable bird-notes, clear and cheery, and across the fields some church bells, calling to early service, sounded sweetly on the pleasant morning breeze.

Hilary had no difficulty in finding Fairmead, for her first inquiry elicited the fullest information. Fairmead was evidently a place of importance in the neighbourhood.

It was a large and rambling old manor-house,

set in its own well-wooded grounds, and old enough to be picturesque without being pretentious. A dark holly-hedge shut it in from the gaze of the curious, and over this prickly boundary the purple and white of lilac and "the dropping wells" of golden laburnum nodded to the admiring girl.

This May day, with its clear sky and sunshine, its fragrance of flowers and young foliage, showed the place at its best.

Hilary found a gate in the hedge, and walked up the path to the house. Not a sign of human habitation encouraged her to mount the broad flight of low steps which led to the heavy, oak-bound door. Her knock re-echoed through the silent house in the most disconcerting manner, and there was time for her to feel oddly shy before footsteps were heard and a prim, elderly servant opened the door.

She looked surprised to see a visitor at this early hour, and in reply to Hilary's request to see Mr. Hilder, said that her master was not seeing callers just now.

"I am scarcely a visitor," said Hilary frankly. "I come on a matter of business."

"Then perhaps you will walk in, and I

will tell my mistress. I will ask her if she can see you."

Hilary followed the maid across a wide, tiled hall, and was ushered into a cool, shaded drawing-room with many windows opened on a lovely, old-fashioned garden which reminded her of Madame Brun's garden in Paris. The room itself was one of those quaint, old-world parlours only seen in country houses which have been lived in for generations by one family. There was that mingling of shabbiness and comfort, that apparent retention of this or that from affection rather than utility or decoration, which no upholsterer can give to a house "furnished throughout on the most modern and artistic scale." A few valuable Romneys and Reynolds on the walls drew attention from the faded draperies, and masses of golden daffodils in costly jars lit up dark corners. There was a little fine Chippendale furniture and a mantelpiece carved by Grinling Gibbons, and though Hilary's eyes were too untrained to gauge their real merit, she approved their beauty.

She had plenty of time to study her surroundings. An hour passed before the door opened and there entered a little old lady, for whom this charming room seemed the

most appropriate setting. She was exceedingly tiny, quite the smallest creature Hilary had ever seen, with little white, blue-veined hands and dark, deep-set eyes, which flashed in quite a youthful way from her faded old face. She wore a long grey gown, clinging and unrustling, and a black lace cap, coming to a point on her abundant white hair. She must once have been very beautiful; even now there was an air of distinction and dignity about her, despite her diminutive proportions.

She sat down in a high-backed chair and motioned Hilary to sit near her.

"You inquired for Mr. Hilder, Miss Pederson. Just now I have to be the medium between him and callers. He is suffering from an affection of the eyes and only sees strangers on the most urgent business."

"I came in answer to the advertisement," Hilary said, wishing she did not feel so shy and awkward. "Mr. Hilder wants a secretary who can read German and French. I have lived so long abroad that I speak them almost as freely as my native tongue. I am very anxious to get some post which will bring in a little money. I shall be most awfully glad if Mr. Hilder will try me."

The old lady looked at her with unmistakable surprise and some disapproval. She was a very old-fashioned little lady, and the boldness of the modern girl in entering the arena and battling with her brothers for a livelihood was something she could not understand.

"You astonish me," she said, shaking her head. "I am sure that Mr. Hilder never entertained the idea of a lady secretary."

"Perhaps the idea of a girl doing what he wants has not occurred to him, but it may not be displeasing when it is suggested," urged Hilary, gathering courage. "Many girls take such posts, you know. I am ready to work very hard to please him. I'm sure he will find my German and French all right."

Mrs. Hilder leaned back in her chair, and a faint smile crossed her faded old face. There was something very attractive about this eager, radiant young creature, but it seemed oddly incongruous to think of her earning her living.

"Tell me, is it necessary for you to earn money, my child, or is it that you are bitten by the modern notions concerning independence and freedom to do as fancy dictates?" she asked.

Hilary's colour rose.

"It is necessary, absolutely necessary," she

replied quietly. Then something in the old lady's pitiful ejaculation, in the sweet, old-world haste with which she apologised for putting the embarrassing question, moved the girl to tell her the whole story. She found herself pouring out the tale of Mrs. Pederson's losses, the impossibility of their remaining at Mrs. Bateson's, and her own determination to add to her income and to save her aunt the discomforts which were, for her, actually temptations.

"If you can do what Mr. Hilder requires you shall come, my poor child," the old lady said, feeling that she was about to pluck a brand from the burning. "I will go up to him at once. Perhaps he will be able to see you, and the whole matter can be settled."

Left alone, Hilary went over the long interview with interest.

"What a dear old lady! And how well she has mastered the art of growing old gracefully," she thought. "If only Aunt Sophie would take lessons from her! But that is past hoping for. I am sure she will do her best to persuade Mr. Hilder to try me. I hope he is not an obstinate old gentleman, with prejudices against employing what Mr. Bradbrook generically terms 'female labour.'"

She waited ten minutes, then the maid who admitted her opened the door and requested her to walk up to the library.

Hilary sprang to her feet with alacrity. It was surely a good omen that Mr. Hilder had consented to see her. She followed the maid up the wide, polished staircase, along a corridor hung with grim family portraits, and was ushered into a large, sunny room, lined with books. A writing-table stood in the great bow window, and in an armchair before it sat a man, who rose hastily to his feet as she entered.

Hilary stared at him with a startled face as she dropped into the chair Mrs. Hilder pointed out to her. It was patent she had mistaken the relation between the old lady and the young man who now moved slowly across the room, to anchor on the hearthrug.

"My son, this is the young lady of whom I spoke to you," Mrs. Hilder said gently. "You will be glad to know, Miss Pederson, that my son has no prejudices against employing a lady secretary, provided other things are equal." She sat down as she spoke in the chair Mr. Hilder had vacated, and smiled encouragingly at the girl.

Hilary expressed her pleasure rather nervously. She was more anxious than ever to obtain this post, and decided, in her impetuous way, that she would love to work for the man, who now began to question her concerning her various qualifications.

She looked at him long and pitifully. There was this sad privilege in being Max Hilder's companion; he could not know however intently you studied him, however sorrowful the gaze fixed on his face. He was a tall, broadly built young Saxon, with a quantity of light brown hair falling in loose waves about his white and smooth forehead. A disfiguring shade hid the upper part of his face, but the firm chin, the curve of the clean-shaven cheek, suggested that it was strong and manly, if not handsome.

"And you are ready to pity the sorrows of a blind beggar, Miss Pederson?" he said lightly. "All other things being equal, I would rather have a woman for my work than a man. He would not be able to keep the insolence of his own health and his 'thank-God-I-am-not-as-this-other-man' out of his tone and manner. It is one thing to bear your infirmities and quite another to have them thrust upon your

notice." He ended with a laugh, which touched Hilary more than bitterness could have done, it was so frank and cheery. It was manifest that however the world was darkened for the man, he meant to show it an unruffled front and meet the blows "with sword broken but unbroken courage." She could imagine him crying with Heine, "Let me grow old in body, but let my soul stay young; let my voice quaver and falter, but never my hope."

"I will do my very best; I will work hard," she said impulsively. "Will you explain what the duties would be, and see if my knowledge is up to your requirements, Mr. Hilder?"

He smiled. "The duties are simple. I am preparing a book on French and German folk-tales, and your duties, put briefly, would be to read to me, to write at my dictation, and to look up points I want verified. I expect I shall be an autocratic master, for I am not accustomed to using anyone's brains but my own, and one does not stop to measure the labour of one's own hand and mind. By the way, you might read me a page or two of German. Since you have been in school in Paris your French will be sure to be all right. There is a copy of the 'Reise Bilder' on that small

table. Open it where the marker is put and read on."

Hilary found the book, and began to read in in her clear, vibrant voice. The book was new to her, and she soon became interested in it; something in the bitter-sweet lines of the German poet made her think of the blind student who was listening to her; like Heine, he was suffering under a heavy disability, and, like the poet, he had set himself to bear it with unfaltering courage and a mirthful spirit.

She read on, scarcely noting the time, till Mr. Hilder stopped her.

"Thank you, that will do. You read splendidly, Miss Pederson. I shall think myself lucky to have your help with my work. Did my mother tell you that the engagement was really only a temporary affair? I hope to be a whole man again in the autumn, and the engagement therefore can scarcely last more than three months. Do you care to come to me on such terms?"

"Yes, I will come," said Hilary. "I gathered from the advertisement that it was not permanent. I shall be glad to do what I can in that time."

"Then it is settled. I can't talk more now.

My mother will arrange with you about terms and that kind of thing," he said. "Mother, are you going to give Miss Pederson some lunch now? I see that it is time for Gregory to bring mine, and fellow-feeling makes us wondrous kind. Don't you agree with the famous Mr. Pepys, Miss Pederson, that one's amiability is apt to suffer when one is 'empty'?"

Hilary laughed, and followed Mrs. Hilder from the room.

"My dear, you are his first visitor, and he is tired," the old lady said apologetically. "He will not dismiss his visitors quite so abruptly in a week's time."

"Has he been very ill?" asked Hilary sympathetically.

"Not perhaps as you would count illness, my dear," Mrs. Hilder said, looking into the radiant, healthy young face. "There are things harder to bear and more truly wearing to the system than bodily pain, though Max has had his share of that also. Six months ago he caught a fever in Perugia, and something went wrong with his eyes. You can guess what that meant to him. It threatened to blight his whole literary career. He went to Wiesbaden as soon as he was well enough to travel, to

consult Pagenstecher, the famous oculist. Pagenstecher sent him home at once. He could do nothing for him then; he told him to give the eyes complete rest and, in the autumn, to go again to Wiesbaden for an operation. Though the oculist is hopeful, he has warned us that it may not be successful."

"If not—oh, how sad!" said Hilary, tears starting to her eyes.

Mrs. Hilder smiled faintly.

"It almost broke my heart; but I have compensations even in this trouble. No sorrow is without its mitigations. The old know it, though the young find it hard to believe. They have no memory of outlived sorrows to learn from, as we have. I have my boy's company, which I had not in his days of health and work. It has made me very glad to find him anxious to take up again the thread of his studies. It was terrible to see him, in the first weeks of his darkness, sitting idle, and almost speechless, after a life so full and bright as his has been. He wa heroically patient, but passive patience is a dreary thing to watch. He is patient still, but it is with that noble patience which is concentrated strength. He has adjusted himself to

life as it is, and with your help, he may do his best work this summer."

"I will do all I can," repeated Hilary, feeling that the simple words only feebly expressed all she meant to achieve.

CHAPTER XIII.

A COTTAGE IN A WOOD.

OVER luncheon the details of Hilary's engagement were arranged. She was to receive forty pounds a year and to spend five hours each day at Fairmead. Hilary decided that she was singularly fortunate; with this addition to her income she could hope to make Aunt Sophie more comfortable than she had been since leaving Markham Square.

"There is the question of your lodgings, Miss Pederson," Mrs. Hilder said, as they rose from the table. "I have lived so long in Meadham that no doubt I can help you."

"Lodgings!" exclaimed Hilary, making a wry face. "I have suffered so much in other people's houses that I hoped it would be possible to take a cottage, even if it were a very small one."

"Possible, of course, but imprudent," said Mrs. Hilder. "You see, my dear, your engagement is actually only a temporary one. At the end of three or four months Mr. Hilder will go to

Germany, and on his return he may need you no longer. I cannot buoy you up with the faintest hope of finding another position in this quiet neighbourhood."

Hilary laughed and nodded. "I always forget the poet's advice to 'look before and after. Of course, it must be lodgings, though I say it with keenest regret."

"That need not depress you, my dear. Your experiences perhaps have been unpleasant," said Mrs. Hilder. "I have something to propose which I think will suit you." She went to the window and drew back the lace curtain. "Do you see that red roof peeping from among the trees beyond the shrubbery? A niece of mine, the widow of a London doctor, lives there. Her means are not large, and the house is more roomy than she requires for her own needs. I believe she would take you and your aunt to board with her if I suggested it. I could wish you no better fortune than to live under Agnes Vision's roof. To know her is a liberal education."

Hilary looked apprehensive. Such a remarkable woman might be difficult to please; and how would she stand Aunt Sophie's many eccentricities?

Mrs. Hilder seemed to anticipate no objections. "Suppose we go at once and see her," she said. "She is leaving Meadham in a day or two to visit some of her husband's relatives in Russia, so that for a few weeks you and your aunt might expect to have the house to yourselves. You would have no trouble, however, on that score, for Mrs. Vision's servants thoroughly understand the care of the house."

Evidently considering her small lace cap sufficient head-covering for the short walk to Mead Cottage, Mrs. Hilder stepped out on the terrace, and with Hilary at her side went down the large, well-kept garden. Near as the cottage had appeared, it was five minutes' walk from Fairmead. A rustic bridge crossed a little stream which flowed beyond the belt of firs, then a little spinney, carpeted with primroses, had to be traversed before they were at the gate of the quaint, red-roofed cottage.

Mrs. Vision was in the porch nailing up a climbing rose-bush when her visitors came up the pebbled path. She put down her hammer and came forward to meet them, glancing past Mrs. Hilder's grey-clad figure to her tall

companion with a faint expression of surprise. It was seldom that visitors came to Fairmead, and never once since its master's illness.

All Hilary's compunctions vanished as she looked at Mrs. Vision.

"I'm like the Queen of Sheba, the half was not told me," she said mentally. "I've only seen three Meadham people, and each one is a miracle of niceness. What a favoured spot it must be!"

Mrs. Vision was a tall, fair woman, verging on thirty. She was not handsome, for her features were too heavily moulded for beauty, but both her face and her amply proportioned figure had that air of distinction which Balzac declares the most precious gift that can be bestowed upon a woman. She wore a loose, graceful gown of some rich black material hanging in large folds which reminded Hilary of the drapery of a Greek statue she had seen at the British Museum.

"How kind of you to come over to see me, Aunt Lucia," she said in a low, musical voice. "I am all alone. The maids have gone to Bishop's Merton for a day's shopping."

"It is a business call, not a social function," said Mrs. Hilder, introducing Hilary. "You

might be sure it was something more than trivial which brought me out at this hour."

In a few words she explained Hilary's presence and what she hoped Mrs. Vision might be able to do for her.

There was no small pride about Agnes Vision. She thanked her aunt, and agreed that it would be a pecuniary advantage to her to let some of her rooms. She offered at once to show the girl those at her disposal, and led the way into the house.

Nothing could have been in greater contrast to the "Select Establishment" under the roof of which Hilary had spent the past seven months than Mead Cottage. It showed in every detail the influence of a refined and cultured mistress. The furniture was simple, but the best of its kind, and save for the ferns and flowers on every side, there was that absence of ornamentation which is often the highest form of art.

Two bedrooms and a pleasant little sitting-room, looking out on the garden and the fir wood beyond, were offered the girl at a price so well within her means that she gladly agreed to take them. Mrs. Vision promised that they

should be ready for her at the end of the following week, when the girl's work with Mr. Hilder began.

"I shall love to be here, Mrs. Vision," Hilary said impulsively. "Your house seems more like home to me than any place I have been in since I left Madame Brun's. I feel"—she hesitated, and laughed shyly—"I feel as though I could breathe here. In London, it is often so difficult to aspire and respire at the same time."

"I know; I have felt that," said Mrs. Vision, laying her large, shapely hand on the girl's shoulder as they stood together in the little square hall. Some women would have kissed the frank, radiant face, but she was not one who gave kisses readily, and disliked people who used them, like asterisks, to fill up awkward places in a conversation. "I think we shall understand each other; though, since I am going away and your engagement is a short one, we may not see much of one another. I am glad to think you are coming under my roof."

"And I am more than glad," cried Hilary impetuously. "It will make up for so much I can never explain. There is something about

Meadham and the people in it that sweetens the mind. I may hope now to keep my taste for the best things; I used to think it was impossible to lose it, but I know now it is astonishingly easy."

Mrs. Vision looked at her intently. There was something more behind that laughing face and that frank, boyish manner than she had suspected.

"The struggle repays, child, never doubt that," she said quickly. "The most finely tempered steel is that which passes the severest tests. In the moral as well as the physical world, the survival of the fittest is the law upon which the whole fabric of ethics is built."

Hilary sighed. So far from feeling that her own afflictions had been a means of edification, she had never seemed to herself so weak and faulty as during the last few months. Emotions and failings never suspected in serener days had come to light and shamed her. She was too young and too little given to introspection to know that it was only through growth she had come now to discover them. More light means more revelatory power. Her character had strengthened, and her moral fibre become finer

through the troubles she had borne of late. She saw things to which once her eyes were holden.

As she travelled back to London, she began to wonder how her aunt would regard the step she had taken. It was impossible but that Mrs. Pederson should object to leave town. Hilary, however, hoped to convince her that it was the wisest and indeed the only possible step. Her taking of the sovereigns from Hilary's purse had practically put it out of her power to refuse to accompany her niece.

Hilary might leave her, and thereby give up her right to the legacy left her by Major Pederson, but no dividends were due for months, and Mrs. Bateson would not consent to keep Mrs. Pederson without any payments. Hilary hoped and confidently believed that she could persuade her aunt to come to Meadham, without using her dependence as a handle, and she meant to spare no pains to do it. Yet if Mrs. Pederson absolutely refused to come, the girl told herself that now she would be justified in leaving her. The life at Mrs. Bateson's had become impossible, and she was right in accepting the clean and wholesome path of honourable work which was open to her. She would

certainly have Frances on her side, and she resolved at the first opportunity to go to Skone Street and tell her friend what she had arranged.

CHAPTER XIV.

A CADMEAN VICTORY.

It was dusk when Hilary reached Tozer Street, the dusk of a spring evening in town, grey and dull.

Mrs. Bateson opened the door as though she had been on the watch.

"It is all right; I come home crowned with success, so congratulate me, you dear woman," Hilary cried, anticipating her eager question. "No, I won't have any tea, thank you. I shall just have time to dress for dinner and explain my absence to Aunt Sophie. I suppose she is still upstairs."

Mrs. Bateson puckered her forehead and looked worried.

"She has not come back yet, my dear; she went out unbeknowst to me directly after luncheon. A gentleman called twice this afternoon to see her, and told Sarah he had an appointment. Miss Kemsing came a while ago, too, and she is waiting upstairs in your room."

Hilary looked troubled as she ran upstairs.

She wished she had asked Mrs. Bateson for a description of the visitor; she had a gloomy conviction that it could be no other than Chivers Smith.

Frances was sitting reading in the light of a small fire she had lighted, though in the Bateson establishment a fire in a bedroom was a luxury only justified by dire extremity.

"Well, you and the mater are in festive mood to-day, my good child," she said, rising and saluting the newcomer. "I arrive anxious to know how you are surviving the barbarities of this place, and find that the mater has not been home since luncheon and that no one has seen you since the screech of dawn. It was lucky I brought my anatomy books with me or I could not have waited. Get a light, please, before you disrobe. I know you have a weakness for the gloaming, but I hate it. As Charles Lamb once said, it's so inconvenient to have to feel your companion's face for the responsive smile."

Hilary laughed, but the laugh did not ring so blithely as usual, and Frances looked up at her sharply.

"What is the matter, Hilary? You look tired, and you are positively getting thin.

know man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward and that we girls cannot expect to escape our share, but has anything fresh occurred?"

Hilary shook her head as she stretched and straightened her gloves thoughtfully. Suddenly she looked at Frances with a whimsical smile curving her mouth.

"Like Noph, I have distresses daily, but I have taken desperate measures to escape them altogether. I am going to surprise you, Frances."

"My dear child, it is the way of the foolish to confound the wise," Frances said languidly. "If you can explain your meaning without being too oracular, please do so."

Hilary dropped on the hearthrug at Frances' feet.

"I'll burst the fact on you without preface or preamble. I have this day arranged to leave 'Bateson's Select Establishment,' and to take up my abode in a sleepy little village in Hertfordshire, named Meadham."

"I always knew you hankered after fresh fields and pastures new, but I thought it was a question of pounds, shillings and pence," said Frances.

"Yes, it could not be done on ninety pounds a year, nor could we stay here under the same

luxurious conditions. I am going to add to our fortune by my own exertions. Behold me the secretary of a literary man, engaged to assist in the production of an epoch-making work on French and German folk-tales. The whole business is settled, even to the secondary matter of lodgings. The only detail to be filled in is the breaking of the news to Aunt Sophie and the gaining of her consent to this radical change in our fortunes."

Frances leaned back in her chair and let her beloved "Anatomy" slide unheeded to the floor.

"Well, for independence and sheer audacity commend me to Hilary Pederson! To go and do such a thing without consulting a soul! Of course, I would not have allowed you to do it. You should have had half my princely income. I would even have extended to the mater the shelter of my palatial roof, though she would be a dreadful person to have about one, when one happened to be undergoing a mental strain. And, pray, what sort of a man is this for whom you have agreed to drudge?"

Hilary leaned back, her hands clasped behind her head, pressing forward her loose wavy hair, as she studied the cracked, discoloured ceiling.

"I can guess the sort of man you are pic-

turing," she said gaily. "A wide experience of learned professors has taught you to know the type; but you will be hopelessly at fault on this occasion. My professor happens to be a young man of thirty or so—quite the most charming age for a man, isn't it? All men ought to be thirty. I should say he was handsome, though when you are shown only the lower part of a face it is rather difficult to be sure. Did I tell you that he was suffering with his eyes and remained hidden behind a green shade? Hence the need for my services." She ended with a little laugh, in which Frances could not help joining.

"Is there anything on earth you can be serious about, Hilary?" she exclaimed.

"If there is anything on earth the better for being whined about, tell me," Hilary replied quickly.

Frances shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps you are right. I learned long ago that the things one cries over are seldom worth it. There's nothing satisfies like work."

At this moment a heavy step was heard on the stairs, and a voice called Hilary A minute later Mrs. Bateson opened the door and looked in with an agitated face.

"Please come down, my dears, do," she said. "Mr. Bradbrook has brought poor Mrs. Pederson home in a cab. He says he found her in a faint somewhere up the Marble Arch way. She had slipped getting off a bus, he said, and the fright made her a bit queer. She looks bad now, poor dear."

The girls flew down the stairs. Halfway they met Mr. Bradbrook assisting the fainting woman to her own room with a skill and kindliness which made Hilary regret that she had constantly snubbed his efforts towards friendliness.

"No cause for alarm, Miss Pederson," he said cheerfully. "The old lady will be as right as a trivet when you get her into her own bed. A good meal and a night's rest will mend all that's wrong. Slipping off a bus when you have been trapesing about all day without a good square meal, is apt to try the strongest of us."

Mrs. Pederson was too worn out to resent these personalities on the part of a young man she cordially detested. She allowed herself to be half carried, half dragged up the steep staircase, and resigned herself unprotestingly into the hands of Hilary and Frances. The younger girl lingered a moment at the door to thank Mr. Bradbrook for his kindness.

"Don't mention it, please, Miss Hilary. Isn't Mrs. Bateson always telling us we are one family? and relations are bound to stand by one another in little mishaps," he said airily. "I'd do a sight more to ease the burdens on your shoulders. Sam Bradbrook can see as far through a stone wall as most people, and the old lady leans rather heavy on you."

Hilary stiffened and her colour rose. Oh, why could they not be kind without intermeddling in her private worries? She opened her lips to reply, then turned away quickly, entered the room, and shut the door behind her.

The insurance agent stood for a minute looking after her, whistling softly.

"Poor little girl! it hurts her to be under an obligation to a third-class fellow like Sam Bradbrook," he said. "He ain't her sort, I suppose. It must be a bit of a nuisance to be poor *and* proud if you are forced to herd with common mortals."

Mrs. Pederson had recovered somewhat when Hilary entered. She was sitting before the fire, stretching out her thin hands to the blaze.

"It's an attack of the heart, Miss Kemsing says," whispered Mrs. Bateson sympathetically.

"It's lucky Miss Kemsing was here, for she is three parts a doctor and knows what to do. I wish I could stay with you, but I must run down and serve the dinner. Folks must feed whatever happens. It's the one thing that never stands aside for other people's troubles."

She bustled away, and Hilary came and knelt down beside her aunt. "Do you feel better, dear?" she said gently. "You must have gone far to tire yourself so much."

"Far! I don't remember," Mrs. Pederson said dully. "It was something important took me out. I had to go. I can't remember now why I went."

"Don't try to remember, mother; it is bad for you to worry yourself," Frances said soothingly.

"Why should you interfere?" Mrs. Pederson retorted sharply. "It is a matter which concerns only Hilary and me, Frances. You have no lot nor part in my private business."

Frances looked away quickly. She owned that it was just for Hilary to take the first place in her mother's confidences. She had deliberately withdrawn herself from participation in them. Yet those few minutes spent alone with her mother, using her skill to

alleviate her mother's pain, had taught the girl that she loved her better than she guessed. She was honestly glad to make the discovery, and would have rejoiced had Mrs. Pederson shown any desire for her help and presence. Yet it was to Hilary the invalid turned when she recovered full consciousness, and for Hilary she reserved her confidences. Well, it was best so, perhaps; she, Frances, had her own work to do, work which taxed all her faculties, absorbed all her thoughts, and demanded her whole future.

It was not till an hour after, when Frances had gone away and Hilary was seated by the bed, bathing the invalid's forehead and fanning her gently, that Mrs. Pederson told what had taken her out that day.

"I'm a wicked woman, Hilary, and you had better go away and leave me," she said hysterically. "Paul Kemsing has offered you a home, you had better go to him. I can't live like this, and it is no use for me to try. I can't live without money; and I won't either, when there's so many ways of making it. I promised you that I would not go to Chivers Smith again, but it was a stupid promise to make. He says the Bultang Gold Mine is

paying magnificent dividends, and I'm a fool not to borrow a few hundreds of him and put in it."

"Surely you have not been borrowing again, Aunt Sophie?" Hilary asked, her heart feeling like lead. "You promised me, you know."

Mrs. Pederson plucked at the counterpane nervously. "I went out to-day, Hilary, because I wouldn't see Chivers Smith. I have put a little money into one or two things of his—a pound or two, nothing much, but I haven't borrowed. He was coming here to-day to arrange a loan."

Hilary frowned. "He did call. He came twice, and seemed annoyed not to find you at home."

Mrs. Pederson nodded drearily. "I had written asking him to call. I was sick of being without money, and the prospectus he sent was splendid. You need not look at me as though I were not fit to breathe the same air as you, girl. I broke my promise in writing to him, but I did not see him, so no harm is done."

"I'm not blaming you," Hilary said sadly. "I can see it is hard for you. But we must not borrow when we could never pay back, and there are other ways."

"Yes, you can leave me and go to Paul Kemsing," said Mrs. Pederson slowly. "I don't expect you to stay with me, Hilary. It is a wretched life, and you are young. You will have to give up your income, but Paul will make it up to you. It is little enough, but I daresay Mrs. Bateson will keep me here and I shall manage. What does it matter how dull and lonely a wrecked life like mine may be. You had far better leave me to muddle along by myself."

Hilary touched the claw-like hand on the edge of the counterpane gently.

"No, no! I will not leave you," she said soothingly. "All will come right if you keep away from Chivers Smith and his horrid business. We will go away, Aunt Sophie, and be happy together. I have found a way of making it quite possible."

Mrs. Pederson lay back among the pillows and stared at her curiously.

"What do you mean?" she asked querulously. "I suppose the mystery has to do with your absence to-day. Mrs. Bateson said you had gone into the country."

Hilary nodded. "I wonder whether you are well enough to hear my story now, or whether

I had better reserve it till to-morrow," she said meditatively. "Frances said you were not to be worried about anything until you had had a night's rest."

"I shall not sleep for hours, and it will amuse me to hear," Mrs. Pederson insisted. "What took you in the country?"

Hilary hesitated, scarcely knowing where to begin her story, and anxious to tell it in the most propitious manner.

"I went to see a literary man who had advertised for a secretary," she said cheerfully. "Our money matters need instant adjustment, you know, and I thought it would be easier to earn a little than to retrench. I was engaged, and I have promised to enter on my duties next week."

"Well, of all the unheard-of projects! And to take such a step without saying a word to me! You are a bold girl, Hilary Pederson. May I ask how you propose to get to and from your work each day? It seems to me all your salary will be swallowed up in railway fares. And what am I to do in your prolonged absence, pray?"

"Dear Aunt Sophie, Meadham is miles and miles away. I could not possibly go daily. I

shall live there, and I hope you will promise to come with me. It is the sweetest place, and I have got charming rooms. We should be tremendously happy, and quite out of the reach of that odious man, Smith."

"Never! Nothing shall induce me to bury myself alive in any country village," cried Mrs. Pederson. "You may go if you like, Hilary, but not one penny of your ninety pounds can you touch unless you remain with me."

Hilary said nothing. She always found it wisest to allow the torrent of her aunt's wrath to roll on unchecked. To-night, physical weakness soon reduced it to a purling stream of complaint and protest. It occurred to Mrs. Pederson, later, that her own indiscretion in abstracting the sovereigns from Hilary's purse had placed her in an awkward position as regards the future. She was shrewd enough to know that in Hilary's absence Mrs. Bateson would not be willing to keep her unless she could pay the weekly bill, and it was certain that there would be no more dividends wherewith to pay that bill for many weeks.

"Don't ask me to decide to-night. I'm worn out and sick of everything," she said at last. "You can go away and leave me in

peace. Yes, go away and talk to your Mrs. Bateson, who always knows more of your plans than your stupid old aunt does."

She turned her face to the wall and shut her eyes. Hilary stood for a moment irresolute. Though she was firmly convinced of her own wisdom in this matter, she felt that she had gained a Cadmean victory; the pain was equal on each side. She stooped and kissed the grey, wrinkled face.

"Poor Aunt Sophie! I hate to do anything you do not like," she said remorsefully. "Try to sleep now, dear; things always look brighter in the morning."

Aunt Sophie did not deign to notice this remark, and Hilary slipped quietly away.

CHAPTER XV.

QUITE AN OCCASION.

MRS. PEDERSON had this redeeming quality, she always resigned herself to the inevitable with fairly good grace. She was clever enough to see that Hilary had commonsense and right on her side, and though she grumbled loudly at circumstances, she recognised the wisdom of submitting to them. She told Hilary next day that she would go with her to Meadham, and set herself to convince the boarders that failing health and the third-rateness of "Bateson's Select Establishment" had decided her to try country air and more refined quarters.

"My health is not what it was," she informed Miss Heckler languidly. "This place was possible for a time when my affairs were in disorder, but it has told upon me. And I must think of Hilary, too; a girl has no chances in a place of this kind, you know."

"I quite agree with you, dear Mrs. Pederson; she has no chance at all," replied Miss Heckler, with a toss of the head. "In

London the labour market is quite overstocked, I am told. Our dear little Hilary will do far better in the provinces."

Mrs. Pederson coloured angrily. "Spiteful thing!" she said to herself. "Hilary has not the slightest idea of keeping her own counsel. What need was there to tell these people that she is going to take a situation. I shall be glad to see the last of them all."

She spent most of her last week in Tozer Street in her own room, appearing only at meals, when she cloaked herself in dignity and gave an undivided attention to the dishes. It was fortunate that the preparations for departure were few, for they fell entirely upon Hilary's shoulders.

"It is your choice, not mine, this change of quarters, so it is only fair that you should do the packing," Mrs. Pederson said sulkily. "Goodness knows there is little enough to pack."

"It's an ill wind that blows no one any good," laughed Hilary. "If I had a house to dismantle I should have no time to do a dozen things I have promised to do for the people in the house." She held up a bodice she was remodelling for Mrs. Bateson. "It will be one

of my comforting reflections when I get to Meadham that dear little Mrs. Bateson is looking nicer than she has done ever since I knew her. This confection looks cosy and elderly now, but its colour and scantiness have assaulted my eyes for months."

"How can you tolerate these people or bother about them!" Mrs. Pederson said. "Mrs. Bateson gets on my nerves with her fussy, vulgar little ways."

Hilary lifted her head impatiently, then she went on with her work without uttering the indignant protest which rose to her lips.

"She is not vulgar, dear, only commonplace," she said quietly. "I always feel that her real kindness to us covers a multitude of social lapses, and I shall be very sorry to leave her."

"She has been paid for all she has done," Mrs. Pederson insisted. "You can't deny that she is an atrocious manager and the service is abominable. I hope to goodness our next landlady will know how to behave herself and to keep her house."

Hilary laughed mischievously. In imagination she saw Mrs. Vision's grave Madonna face, her stately figure, and her graceful draperies. She

would certainly know how to "behave herself," but Hilary was not quite sure that she would please Aunt Sophie any better than vulgar, good-tempered little Mrs. Bateson had done.

Half an hour later she carried the finished bodice down to Mrs. Bateson's room.

Mrs. Bateson was in the throes of menu writing, and gladly relinquished the task to the girl whilst she tried the effect of the new "confection" and pronounced it "beautiful, if a shade too high in the neck for the ways of the house."

"I shall wear it to-night, for I've an idea that the boarders are going to make this evening, your very last evening, quite an occasion," she said mysteriously. "No one is dining out, and Mr. Bradbrook asked me to put a specially good dinner on the table. It is to be quite an occasion, I'm sure."

Hilary laughed merrily. "How alarming! But Aunt Sophie will be pleased, though it may make her more and more disinclined for the quietness of rural little Meadham."

As Mrs. Bateson had hinted, it was the intention of the rest of the boarders to make this last evening the Pedersons spent under the roof of the boarding-house something of a

festival. There was not one who did not regret Hilary's departure, and she forgave all the queer little ways which had often jarred for the sake of the sincere and hearty kindness showered upon her now. Miss Heckler had learned a new song, and Mr. Bradbrook an absolutely new joke, whilst Miss Bird laid aside her cynicism, and petted and made much of her when they went up to the drawing-room.

"You will come and see us whenever you are in town, Miss Pederson," she said, under cover of the loud music which never impeded conversation or seemed to ask for an audience. "You will be sure to find me here. 'Men may come and men may go, but I stay on for ever.' It's a ridiculous place if you look at it from some points, but it's convenient, and you are never bothered about rules and conventionalities. You might give me your address, and if I am ever in your part of the country, I will look you up. I expect you will be dull enough after having lived in town. You are going to do secretary's work, are you not? If you ever take to scribbling—and nearly everybody does some time or other nowadays—you just write to me. I'll do my best to get you a column in one of the weeklies, for a

start; 'Hints to Mothers' or 'How to Bring up your Sons,' or something of that sort. I know lots of girls who have begun like that and are doing well in a small way."

Hilary laughed, and thanked her. She had not the least intention of enlisting as an adviser in matters of which she knew herself conspicuously ignorant, and she had absolutely no literary ambitions.

"Well, if you change your mind, write to me," replied Miss Bird, as Mr. Bradbrook came up to claim Hilary's attention for a new puzzle he had invented.

"It's too simple to engage you a couple of minutes," he said jocosely. "I'm too distraught at your desertion of us to originate anything clever. I can't fancy 'Bateson's Select' without you now, really I can't. You'll find me at Meadham one morning begging you, in the name of the assembled boarders, to come back to us. The milkmaid—there are always milkmaids in the country, I believe—will find me hanging over the gate at the screech of dawn."

"You talk a lot of nonsense, Mr. Bradbrook," Hilary said, severely. "Though, if ever you come to Meadham, I am sure we shall be pleased to see you," she added, smiling

"You need not make yourself conspicuous by hanging, for an indefinite time, over the gate." Hilary did not resent Mr. Bradbrook's familiarities and his perpetual jokes, as she had once done. It was as foolish to do so as to quarrel with the shape of his nose or the commonplaceness of his florid, good-tempered face. She had learned the folly of insisting that everyone she met should be a hero in embryo, and had come to accept the fact that most were kindly, ordinary creatures, anxious to do their work in the world, with no desires which outstripped their opportunities, and no cravings that went to shipwreck on the rocks of circumstance. She was even glad it was so; she had grown a little afraid of the lives which threatened to run on unconventional lines.

"I say, are you genuine in that? You wouldn't mind if I biked down some Bank Holiday?" the young man said, with evident pleasure, tinged with surprise. "Mrs. P. won't much like it, but if you give me a permit I'll face her displeasure. Shall I make it the first holiday that comes along?"

Hilary nodded. "If Aunt Sophie's predictions come true, long before then the stagnation of Meadham will have reduced her to a con-

dition of dulness when she will welcome her worst enemy with effusion."

Bradbrook made his appearance next morning as the luggage was being piled on a cab and Mrs. Pederson was showering good-byes right and left. They fell like the dew of heaven, alike on those she liked and disliked; she was too glad to turn her back on Tozer Street to care to discriminate. Her effusiveness received no check when Bradbrook presented himself at the door of the cab and held out a bouquet of phenomenal proportions.

"A small token of esteem and all that sort of thing," he said airily, proffering the token. "You can hold it out of the window if it gets too whiffy, but don't refuse it, or you'll hurt the sensitive feelings of S. J. B."

Mrs. Pederson accepted the offering with becks and wreathed smiles. "How delightful of you to think of such a thing, Mr. Bradbrook," she said coquettishly. "Such a royal way of setting anyone off!"

"Sweets to the sweet," replied the young man, beaming expansively. "Tell me I may come to see you in your new place and I'll bring you a posy that will put that one in the shade."

"Of course you may come. We shall be delighted to see you," Mrs. Pederson declared; and then there was more waving of handkerchiefs and last words to those gathered on the steps.

Hilary leaned back in her corner of the cab with eyes which were too dim to see much that was going on. She had said her goodbyes earlier and her heart was too sore to go over them again. It was characteristic of her to give herself so unstintedly to those with whom her lot was cast, that parting, after ever so short a time, was like leaving something of herself behind. She watched Mrs. Pederson, and marvelled at the effusiveness she expended on those she openly declared herself glad to turn her back upon. There was something in Hilary which, then and always, revolted against the least shadow of deceit, the making and acting even of a social lie.

CHAPTER XVI.

FAIRMEAD.

HILARY often said, and with justice, that she had been specially favoured by fortune at this crisis of her life. Her coming to Meadham always glowed as a bright spot in a life in which the sunshine far exceeded the cloud. It was the point from which all that was happiest in after days radiated. She entered upon her duties with that enthusiasm which refuses to see disagreeables, and took an interest in her work which delighted her employer.

Max Hilder possessed the happy art of infecting others with his own enthusiasms, and Hilary was an apt pupil. Sometimes she told herself that she did so little and learned so much that it seemed ridiculous to take wages and to pretend that she was earning her living. She had never been so happy in her life as she was when sitting at the table in the pleasant sunshiny library at Fairmead, writing from Mr. Hilder's dictation, or reading to him, or even, as she gained courage and grew to know

him better, discussing with him the details of his work.

There were hours, certainly, which did not pass smoothly. At times Hilder chafed under his disability, and found Hilary's eyes could not do all that his own might have done. He grew inwardly depressed, and despaired over a progress which seemed lamentably slow; then the young secretary felt the sting of sarcasm and the lash of an impatient spirit. As the weeks slipped away these dark hours became rarer; the girl did her work better, and the man fell under the magic influence of her generous warm-heartedness and her obvious desire to please.

When her morning's work was done Hilary always lunched in the pleasant morning-room with Mrs. Hilder. Both enjoyed these little *tête-à-tête* meals. They afforded Mrs. Hilder what seldom had come into her life hitherto, an interested and untiring listener. So few people cared for long conversations on the only topic it really pleased her to talk upon—her son, his charming childhood, the brilliance of his school and college career, his manifold virtues and his wonderful successes.

The greater part of the old lady's life had

been spent in a loneliness which no one seemed to have fathomed. Widowed after two years of married life, she had lived ever since at Fairmead, absorbed at first in the growth of her infant son, living later for the radiant intervals of the schoolboy's holidays, then in the hope that, when his terms at Oxford were over, he would be with her altogether. That time never came. Love of travel and a passion for Teutonic folklore gripped the young man. The months he spent at Fairmead became fewer, whilst he passed his time wandering among the less-known German villages and mountain hamlets, gathering material for the book which was beginning to engross his thoughts. Some people blamed him roundly for his neglect of his home and his mother, and doubted his devotion to her. Mrs. Hilder never did; she loved him and understood that, to the young, it seems natural that the old should bide at home. They had had their day of storm and stress, and could desire nothing more than to live monotonous lives in the backwaters of existence. Only time teaches the young that hearts ache and love demands fulfilment, even though the hair be white and the wrinkles of age are thick about the faded eyes.

Max thought of it all later, when she became the active and he the passive factor in their life together.

From the first Mrs. Hilder had delighted in Hilary's introduction into the quiet life at Fairmead. There was nothing small or mean about this simple, unconventional old gentlewoman. She saw that the girl was bringing a new element into her son's life, giving it a sparkle and gaiety she was too old to give it herself, and she was frankly glad. Being a woman, she was bound to look forward at times and wonder if this daily intercourse of man and maid would make for their happiness or sorrow. Would the autumn see Max a whole man again and Hilary slipping out of the life she did so much to brighten? Impossible to forecast. Mrs. Hilder shook her head as she knitted in the twilight and decided that such things gained nothing by the intermeddling of a third party. She was content to wait and hope. Hilary was a daughter any mother might be proud to claim, but if Max did not find her dear and desirable, well, the gentle old lady hoped that Providence would take care of the young girl's heart and let the autumn find her fancy-free.

Hilary would have been the first to own that her happiest hours were spent at Fairmead. At the Cottage she had plenty of that vexation of spirit which is said to be excellent discipline for heart and temper.

Mrs. Pederson never for a moment concealed her dislike for Meadham, nor her sense of the injustice of fortune which, by the hand of Hilary, had transplanted her thither. The change, indeed, fell more heavily upon her than anyone stopped to consider. She missed everything which used to give savour to her days, and the long weeks stretched before her in an unbroken vista of dulness. Even the minor annoyances, which at least had given her something to talk about, were taken from her.

In retrospect, life at "Bateson's Select Establishment" was infinitely preferable, and she entertained wild projects of returning, whether Hilary consented or not. There was never a moment when she would not willingly have exchanged the beauty and freshness of Meadham for the smuttiness of London squares.

Hilary's heart smote her sometimes when she caught sight of the unhappy face and the limp, depressed figure at the window, and would coax her aunt to share some of her own

amusements. But Mrs. Pederson declared herself sick of aimless bicycle rides and purposeless walks along dreary lanes. She sighed for the joys of Oxford Street, and the excitement of capturing bargains in the autumn sales.

Hilary gave up the attempt to make Meadham a joyous place to her, and was thankful that she did not insist on going back to a more congenial sphere, as it was clearly in her power to do. Hilary herself had not a dull or idle moment. When she was not at Fairmead, she was out of doors, rowing on the little river, flying along the leafy lanes on her bicycle, or rambling in the woods with an escort of village children. She had made a score of friends among the cottagers, and tried to interest Mrs. Pederson in their humble neighbours. That lady absolutely refused to see anything worthy of attention in the old women, with their dreary tales of their ailments, or in the aged men whose reminiscences dated back to days before she was born. She did not care a rap, she said, for their sons and daughters who had married and gone away, and wondered what Hilary found to amuse her in their tedious histories. Her eyes had never yet grown dim over the annals of the poor, never

had her heart swelled at the pitiful cry of the obscure and suffering. Little as she knew it, hers was a bitter loss, for the heart that cannot ache for the woes of others misses, too, the finest joys this world can give.

Mrs. Pederson deserved more pity than anyone gave her in these days. Age can seldom, like the olive, throw out young shoots from the old bole, and hers had never been a fertile or resourceful mind. To rob her of accustomed duties and pleasures was to leave her life empty and purposeless. She was extremely and increasingly unhappy, and, in consequence, extremely and increasingly irritable.

Hilary was by nature so self-reliant and contented that she seldom regretted any step she took. If she had acted wisely, it was well; if she had made a mistake, it was of no use to vex oneself about it afterwards. It was a comfortable point of view, and saved much vexation of spirit. Yet, later, she wondered if she had not been heedless and too much taken up with her own doings at this time. She had certainly been apt to overlook the tediousness of Aunt Sophie's existence. It is so easy, when we feel that we have done the right

thing, to believe that all its consequences must be of the pleasantest also.

Once Mr. Bradbrook cycled down to Meadham and was received with an effusiveness which surprised him. He did not know that Mrs. Pederson's pleasure in seeing him was mainly the backwash of her desire to see any face that reminded her of London and the old life.

CHAPTER XVII.

"LET US FORGET TO BE WISE."

To Hilary this was the shortest summer of her life. The days slipped away, and she would gladly have clogged the wheels of time had she been able. It required more grace than she possessed to welcome the golden and russet beauty of the autumn.

She had been well aware, when she came to Meadham, that her engagement was but a temporary one, but she had never anticipated that it would be such a grief to look forward to its termination. She viewed her removal to some other sphere of labour with a sinking of the heart Mrs. Pederson would never have understood.

Hilary shared to the full Mrs. Hilder's anxiety for the success of the operation for which Mr. Hilder was going to Germany, but she did not not let herself dwell on what that success would mean to her.

She had promised to remain at Meadham until they returned to Fairmead, but, after that, life looked anything but roseate.

On the evening of the day preceding that fixed for the departure of mother and son for Wiesbaden, Hilary was standing in the drawing-room at Fairmead, dressed for dinner. Mrs. Vision had returned unexpectedly from her visit, and Mrs. Hilder had invited the little party from the Cottage to dine. It was to be what Mrs. Bateson termed "an occasion," and the toast was to be "Success to the undertaking," drunk in champagne Max had himself brought from abroad.

Mrs. Vision and Aunt Sophie had not yet arrived, and the girl moved about the room restlessly, taking up a book or burying her face in a bowl of fragrant roses, trying by one means or another to forget that the occasion was one in which regret was mixed with her joy.

"They ought to be here immediately," she said absently. "It isn't like Aunt Sophie to be late at an important function, and she regards this as quite an event."

She went to the window and stepped out on the terrace. As she crossed the sill she started and the colour rushed to her cheeks. Mr. Hilder was leaning against a pillar, and looked up with a smile. Hilary might well be

startled. For the first time since she came to Meadham, she saw him without the disfiguring bandage and the green shade. His eyes, a clear, dark brown, in which she could detect no sign of disease, looked straight into hers with a steady, keen, and scrutinising gaze.

"Mr. Hilder, ought you to be here, and without your shade?" she exclaimed quickly. "Is it wise? Is it right? Suppose you are endangering the success of the operation."

He laughed softly. "Then you have learned to 'look before and after,'" he said. "This is my last evening. Who knows what may happen before I stand here again? Let us forget to be wise for once."

Hilary shook her head. "I could have told you that it is a golden evening, and that Meadham looks lovely as ever. There is nothing so unusual at home and abroad that you need risk anything to see it," she said practically. "Please let me arrange your shade."

He shook his head, and moved a step nearer to the girl.

"Do you know, little comrade, what I was thinking of as I stood here? Not of the long, strait road I shall have to tread if Pagenstecher fails—I can make up my mind to

that—I was thinking that there were a few things I would, if I could, take with me into that darkness. You have helped me so much, little comrade, since you came into my life, that it seemed ridiculous I should go down into the valley of shadows and that you should be only a voice to me. I told myself that, come what might, I would see you once." He spoke rapidly, as if he were almost afraid of himself, taking in all the time the graceful young figure, the clustering brown hair, and the starry eyes, with a hungry, wistful look, which went to the girl's heart.

"Whatever comes now, I shall know you now as you are, child; and who can tell what may betide?"

Hilary's heart beat fast and her lips trembled.

"It must be success—it shall be!" she cried under her breath. She was one of those to whom hope is always so much easier than despair. "Please don't be despondent, Mr. Hilder; Pagenstecher can't fail; it would be too cruel. Don't, don't give up hope."

"I will not," he said quietly. "At least, one may as well hope to the end. I shall find you here when I come back, you have promised me?"

Hilary nodded. Then a sound of voices was heard in the room behind them, and Mrs. Hilder's face was framed in the window.

The young man moved away quickly, and when he appeared in the drawing-room the familiar bandage had been readjusted.

Though the little dinner party passed off without any mishap, and the meal was perfect, a shadow was upon the five diners which no efforts on their part could lift. Mrs. Pederson, who had never dined before at Fairmead, and had been filled with delight at the invitation, voted the evening scarcely less dull than those she passed at the Cottage, whilst Mrs. Vision exerted herself in vain to entertain the rest with reminiscences of her stay abroad.

All were glad when the hands of the clock pointed to ten, and they could part without any show of impolite haste.

For a moment, before starting for the cottage, Hilary found herself alone in the hall with Max Hilder. He could not see her, but his ears, quickened because they had had to serve so often for eye, told him that she was near, and he held out his hand.

"This is good-bye in a sense that it seldom is," he said, smiling faintly. "You will never

meet the same Max Hilder, little comrade. I shall come back in a few weeks' time, but another man. I shall be a whole man, able to take my place with my fellows and to enjoy the birthright of a man, or I shall come home a derelict, cut off from all that constitutes the chief joy of life."

Hilary looked at him with trouble and a little indignation in her face. "You used not to talk like this, Mr. Hilder," she said wistfully.

"I used not to feel like this," he replied bitterly. "Only living teaches one what one wants and what one cannot have. If I come back uncured, I shall have said good-bye to what man prizes most; I shall be cut off from what seems to me now the most desirable thing in the world."

The girl frowned. She did not like this bitter, despondent man, as she had done the bright, brave, debonair Max, who had treated his affliction as though it were not. He seemed lowered, but he touched her heart none the less deeply.

"I do not know what you mean," she said wistfully. "Why dwell on that side of the question? Think of other things; if you are

cut off from what seems dear and desirable, are you not cut off too from troubles other men suffer, troubles old as mankind: the unsparing war of grinding poverty, the struggle for dearly bought food, precarious honour, perils and pitfalls, and the poor rewards of many? In trouble it helps, I think, to look at the troubles of others, at horrors which can never come near us. I have seen some sides of poverty which have made me hot and ashamed. I have often thought it was better to lose a limb or a sense than, having all these, to sink into such sordid poverty, meanness and disgrace as I have seen."

"Little comrade, there are some things a man cannot teach himself to relinquish without long and bitter struggle," he said sadly. "God grant that I come back a whole man."

"Come back as you may, you will be the same to me," Hilary said softly. "And in the fight you will conquer; with sword broken, but unbroken courage."

He touched her hand lightly with his lips, and left her to join her aunt, whose voice was heard on the staircase.

Next morning mother and son left Meadham,

and a quietness settled on those left behind, which Hilary found harder to bear than anything she had yet been called to pass through.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DISASTER.

FRANCES, left behind in London, was working hard for her final. She was working far too hard, said her fellow-students, noting the colourless skin, the wrinkles about her mouth, and the unnatural brilliance of her dark eyes. They read the meaning of these by the light of past experience, and told each other that Frances Kemsing was making a mistake, and that it was a pity Ursula Grantham was away. It was clear that Frances wanted someone to look after her whose opinion she valued.

Frances was secretly glad that Ursula was not at Skone Street just now. It would have been tiresome to be compelled to leave her work on this or that pretext, to be obliged to take the meals her friend insisted on preparing for her, or to be worried into retiring for the night just when the brain was growing hot and clear, and the work seemed most easy to grapple with. The night Ursula went home to nurse her dying father, Frances worked until

the dawn crept in at the east window, and for many a night after, the gas was not turned out till far into the small hours.

She told herself exultingly that she was not suffering in the least through these long hours. Sleep was more and more easily banished, and she felt no weariness in the day, though she had closed her eyes only for a few hours.

All the knowledge she had acquired concerning brain and body had not taught the eager student that everything in this life has its price, and outraged nature will sooner or later demand heavy compensation.

The evening before the examination one of the students made up a little party in her rooms, to celebrate the close of their long strain and to wish success to those who were going up on the morrow. She asked Frances to join them, but the girl refused with something like horror. She thought it sheer madness to laugh and frolic away this last evening, and told her companions so; they might risk their chances of success if they liked, but she could not afford to do so.

She went home to her lonely lodgings and worked till daybreak, reviewing and reassuring herself on weak points, feeling herself keener to

grasp difficult questions, cooler to differentiate, than she had ever been, and gloriously sure of success.

Day was breaking as she pushed together her pile of books, and leaned back in her chair to rest her cramped body. The clouds were breaking up before the coming of the sun, and a golden glow illumined the horizon. In the smokeless air of the early morning, over the sea of roofs, there was a strange, weird beauty in the wide vista. Frances had never paid much attention to natural beauties; she had never in her life given more than a passing glance to sunrise or sunset, but as her tired eyes looked out on this wonder of grey and gold, a strange fascination and terror seized upon her. She saw clearly, and knew what it was she saw, and that there was nothing in the sight to inspire terror, but none the less it filled her with vague, awful horror, for which she could give no cause or reason.

Only she knew that the sight unnerved her, and she clung to the edge of the table for support. She could not bear the dazzling sight, nor had she strength to look away.

"Ursula! Hilary! My God! why am I alone?" she cried. "I cannot bear to be alone!"

At last she forced herself to move away, mechanically put on her hat, fled downstairs and into the street. Tottenham Court Road, into which she wandered, had scarcely yet awakened to the day's work. Silence reigned in the sleeping houses, and, here and there, a high window, caught by the sun, gleamed like gold. The air, fresh and cool, fanned the girl's cheek as she rambled on, anxious only to forget that hour of dawn which had brought such panic with it. She dared not return to her lodging, though what it was she feared she could not tell. When the city rose, with cheerful bustle, she found a restaurant and ordered breakfast. It was served with wondering looks by the waitress; but Frances could not eat, though she felt faint and oddly weak.

She knew that it was the day of the examination, and that she must be at the hall before two o'clock, but all thought of the work, all anxiety concerning her success, had slipped away from her. She was taxing all her powers to put from her the terror which had assailed her at sight of the sunrise, and she longed with all her heart for Hilary. She felt that she would no longer be afraid if Hilary's young strong

arms were round her, and Hilary's frank, smiling eyes looking into hers.

She rested her chin on her hand and leaned forward on the little marble-topped table. It was such a white, pinched face, and such dark, troubled eyes that stared from the corner, that the waitresses gathered together and discussed her in whispers. They let her sit there for an hour, and then one, who could bear the sight of the white, miserable face no longer, came and asked her if she were ill, and if there were anything she could do for her.

Frances started and looked about her wonderingly, then got up and went away, leaving her coffee untasted and unpaid for upon the table. No one attempted to stop her. There was something in her face which forbade question and went to the hearts of those who saw her.

She wandered about the city until the hour approached for the examination. Then she went to the hall and took her seat, without a word of greeting for the little knot of her acquaintances who stood together near the doorway.

A few minutes later they too took their seats, and the papers were distributed. Frances

took up the sheet with trembling fingers. She had worked so hard, she was so well prepared, it was inevitable that she should pass brilliantly. In thought she had often heard herself spoken of as one who had brought honour to the Hospital, and the next generation of students would recall her work with bated breath. She was going to take her place in the world and force the sceptical to acknowledge that there was a work for the woman-doctor and that she did it well.

Vain hope, vain effort! The questions were vague and meaningless to her. She neither grasped their intent nor found the least glimmering of an answer to them in her mind. She could only sit with the paper before her, writing nothing, gradually comprehending the dreadful truth that if she sat there for hours she would write nothing.

Only at the last moment, when the bustle of retiring students warned her that the time allowed for the paper had expired, did she accept defeat. She got up and stumbled blindly from the room. As she went down the staircase two or three girls, chatting together, stopped and looked at her, startled by the expression on the little white face. One

touched her gently on the arm as she passed.

"Our ways lie in the same direction, Miss Kemsing. I you can wait till I fetch my hat, we might walk together," she said kindly.

Frances stared at her blankly. "Why should you wish me to walk with you?" she cried passionately. "Let me alone in my misery."

She threw aside Mary Callender's detaining hand, and ran down the stairs and out into the afternoon sunshine.

Mary Callender drew back with a pale face. She had worked with Frances for months, and the two had been the best of friends.

"She has overworked. I knew she was doing too much," she said, awe-struck. "She looked at me as though I were the veriest stranger. I don't believe she remembered ever having seen one of us before."

Mona Smith nodded. "She sat near me, and I saw that she did not write a line. Her paper was clean as when it was given out, and I know that she was awfully well up. Let us go after her to her diggings. She doesn't look fit to be alone, and Ursula Grantham is not in London."

But Frances had not gone back to Skone Street. All that long and terrible day her thoughts had gone insistently to Hilary, and her desire to be with her became her crying need. When she left the hall she had only one idea, to go to her without delay. Mechanically her steps turned towards St. Pancras Station.

She had enough money in her purse to pay for her ticket, and sat down on the platform to wait for a train. She never knew how long she waited, but evening had fallen when she alighted at the wayside station and set out to walk to Meadham.

She went slowly, very slowly, for she was dazed and weak with her long fast and the horror of the day. Her progress was like that of a child recovering from a long illness, a hesitating and stumbling along the dusty lane. She looked like a child, too, in the twilight, with her small, wan face, her close-cropped hair, her tiny figure in its dark, clinging gown.

She had asked for no directions, and walked on blindly, scarcely conscious when, at a bend in the lane, she left the beaten track and plunged into a spinney of brush and birches. In the dungeon-like darkness of the

wood she went, groping her way, stumbling over tree roots, knocking herself against the boles. Here and there, through rents in the leafy roof, the glimmer of starlight reached her, a dim shine which only exaggerated the darkness of the wood beyond.

Presently the wind began to huddle the birches and to murmur amongst them. Now it sounded for a few minutes with a steady, even rush, then it would swell and break like a wave on the seashore. Frances was not frightened as she had been by the glory of the morning sunshine. She felt that nothing else on earth could give her the pain of that hour of dawn and her intolerable fear of it.

It was the first night she had ever spent under the open sky, but no sense of alarm possessed her. The darkness seemed to fold her round in a close and comforting embrace. She sank down at the foot of a tree and rested her aching head against its bole. She had lost the power of consecutive thought, and gradually the wind acted as a lullaby and sleep took possession of her.

She woke chilled and stiff, to find the world flooded with the faint blue light which precedes the dawn and is never seen but as the

herald of morning. The woods were sighing and shivering in the cool, strong wind, and the piping of birds only seemed to increase the awesome stillness.

For a moment she was at a loss to account for her presence in this strange place; then there came slowly back to her the recollection of her flight from town and her impelling desire to find Hilary.

She got up with difficulty, and shook the forest-mast from her gown, which clung about her damp and heavy. She saw now that she had wandered from the lane, and that she must retrace her steps if she would reach the village. Looking through an opening made by woodcutters in the thick tanglewood, she could see the spire of Meadham Church, the chimneys of the cottages, and the long roof of a house which she guessed to be Fairmead. She gathered up her skirts and walked on, inquiring her way of a passing labourer, who pointed out the little footpath which led along the river bank to the cottage.

CHAPTER XIX.

DARK DAYS AT THE COTTAGE.

EARLY that morning Hilary was up and out of doors. She had, for once, slept ill, and rose with an uncomfortable sense of having dreamed bad dreams.

"Clearly I want something to do," she said, as she dressed quickly. "I don't ask that life shall be all rose-coloured, but I object to it being uniformly drab. I must find work of some kind, or I shall develop a fiendish temper."

It was a fortnight since Mrs. Hilder and her son left Fairmead, and though two or three letters had passed between the Cottage and Wiesbaden, Mrs. Hilder's had conveyed no very definite news. Mr. Hilder had undergone an examination, but the oculist had pronounced no opinion, and the operation was postponed from day to day.

For Hilary the weeks dragged wearily; anxiety made her restless, and she missed the occupation which had been her chief pleasure.

"'Well, for independence and sheer audacity, commend me to Hilary Pederson!'" (*p.* 184).

"Now you can sympathise with me, Hilary," Mrs. Pederson said. "You will be ready to go back to town as soon as the Hilders come home. You only agreed to stay until then, and a silly thing it was to promise. I think I will write to Mrs. Bateson at once and ask her if she can take us in. It is all nonsense about our not being able to afford such accommodation as she can give."

Hilary shook her head. "Don't write yet, please, Aunt Sophie," she said. "Wait until Mr. Hilder comes back. It will be quite soon enough."

Not even to Mrs. Pederson could she tell what lay behind her reluctance to take any steps towards leaving Meadham. If what they hoped for never came to pass and Mr. Hilder still needed her, nothing should persuade her to go back to town.

It was barely six o'clock when Hilary stepped out into the garden and ran quickly across the lawn to the little gate which opened on the path beside the river. This was a favourite walk with her, and little frequented, being a private footpath leading to the village and to Fairmead. She was not likely to meet anyone at this hour. Few people in

Meadham shared her delight in early walks. Mrs. Pederson always said she liked the world well-aired, and it made her shiver to see the mist lying over the fields and every twig with its row of diamonds. This morning the birds were yet drowsily stirring in their nests, and across the fields came the lowing of cows at the milking place.

Suddenly Hilary stopped in her brisk walk and her heart beat faster than usual. Someone was coming towards her swiftly, someone in a soft, dark gown, clinging damply about her, with face and hands gleaming white through the morning mist.

She stood motionless for a moment as though petrified. Then she sprang forward quickly.

"Francie, Francie! can it be you?" she cried, throwing her strong young arms about her cousin. It was Frances, to be sure. Those were Frances' eyes which looked into Hilary's with a weariness beyond description; those were Frances' hands which grasped her shoulders with the clinging of one who has nothing else to hold by; that was Frances' face, drawn and haggard as Hilary had never seen it before.

"I want to be with you, Hilary," Frances said weakly. "I have been coming to you since yesterday. I have been out all night. I think I slept in a wood, but my head hurts so much that I cannot remember."

Hilary held her tightly. Something terrible had happened, but it was plain that Frances was in no condition to explain.

"But now you have found me, dear, you need not worry any more," she said tenderly. "Lean on me, and I will take you to the Cottage. It is quite near."

Frances yielded herself passively into the younger girl's care. She felt too weak and weary to care for any external thing. Even the panic of yesterday and her terrible failure were fading from her mind.

It was still so early that no one except old Margaret was astir when the girls reached the Cottage. In a few words Hilary explained Frances' presence, and with the help of the old servant carried her upstairs and got her into bed. This was scarcely done before the weary wanderer sank into a deep sleep which was almost a stupor.

Leaving her with Margaret, Hilary went to tell Mrs. Vision and her aunt what had

happened and to find a maid who could fetch a doctor. "Something dreadful has happened," she said, with quivering lip. "Thank God she thought of coming straight to us."

The doctor's face was grave as he made his examination and looked at the frail and overtaxed little frame. It was undoubtedly a case of high fever, and the patient had evidently had a severe shock of some kind. Its effect on a system strained to the utmost could not fail to be disastrous, though with great care and skilful nursing she might pull through.

There was no question now of Hilary's sighing for lack of occupation. With Mrs. Vision, she devoted herself to the nursing of Frances, wondering many a time what was the shock which had so shattered the girl's health. One day she wrote to Mona Smith and asked if Frances had sat for the examination, and whether she had shown any signs ot breakdown before leaving town.

Mona answered the letter at once, telling Hilary all she knew of Frances' odd bearing in the examination hall and her absolute failure.

"It was what Ursula Grantham feared," Hilary said, showing the letter to Mrs. Vision.

"The string too tightly stretched is sure to snap. Poor Frances! I dread the day when she comes to remember. She once said that she would never try again. If she failed, she said, her career was closed."

Mrs. Pederson, in whom illness always produced something like a panic, was of little use in the sick-room. There was no doubting her anxiety, however, and it was evident that she suffered greatly in these sad, miserable weeks. If Hilary had doubted that Mrs. Pederson had much affection for her daughter, she did so no longer. Nothing shows the strength of family ties like the possibility of their being broken. Many a day began with the uncertainty whether Frances would see its sunset, and, at night, Hilary often took her place beside the bed wondering whether the patient's blank gaze would open on another dawn.

Mrs. Pederson wandered about the house in a state of conscious and wretched superfluousness. She forgot that she had ever felt Frances presence a vexation, and declared her own future for ever begloomed if it had to be spent without her. In the hour of possible parting, mother-love sprang full-grown into life. Not mother-love as many of us understand it, but the truest

poor Mrs. Pederson's limited nature could germinate.

Of Mrs. Vision and Hilary she was profoundly and unreasonably jealous, envying them the tasks she was herself incompetent to perform. Hilary could not help pitying her deeply, even when her own temper was chafed by her aunt's stream of complaints and her perpetual protest that Mrs. Vision and her niece were bent on robbing her of Frances' affection.

Hilary in these days was indeed "working in the furrows," and had need of "joy to come and sing to her."

It was well that she had Mrs. Vision to lean upon. There are some women whose mere presence is a rock for defence and shelter in the time of stress, and Mrs. Vision was one of these. In earlier and brighter days, the drawing-room in her pleasant house in Gordon Square had been, to a little band of workers in all ranks, by turns a camp of refuge, a confessional, and a shrine. Some kinds of philanthropy cannot be scheduled, and what Agnes Vision did for her friends will never be known. She would say laughingly that she had no time for committees and leagues, and that she had

her own work, though it could not be tabulated. While so many people were "*doing*," it was not a small thing for the world that someone should just "*be*," and it taxed all her powers merely to live.

After all, hers was no mean task, if it were only to hold the cup of refreshment to the lips of some weary pilgrim, to buckle on the armour of one going down into the battle. She remembered the words of a modern writer, that "always behind the flaming renown of some great man there is a woman's hand, pouring unseen the nutritive oil of encouragement and praise," and she was content if she could but play this part well. She was all this and more to our Hilary, travelling over one of the roughest places in her young life.

At last there came a day when the weight of depressing anxiety began to slip from the shoulders of the watchers at the Cottage. It was possible to hope, though even yet only faintly. Frances' tireless babbling ceased, the hectic flush faded from the thin little face, and the doctor's eyes smiled as he looked across the bed at Mrs. Vision.

"We shall pull her through now, if all goes well," he said. "She'll owe her life to you

and that bonny Miss Hilary. It has been a hand-to-hand fight, and so there's some credit in winning."

Mrs. Vision called Margaret to take her place, and went downstairs at once to tell Hilary. The girl was walking in the garden, where the trees were fast losing their leaves, and the shrubs had begun to look black and shrivelled.

She was pacing slowly to and fro, reading a letter she held in her hand. When she turned to meet Mrs. Vision, there was a light in her eyes which had not been there for weeks.

"Your face says Francie is better," she said brightly. "This is indeed a red-letter day. I have just had a note from Mrs. Hilder, and there is one in the hall for you. They are coming home the week after next. When I stopped the doctor at the gate and heard that Francie was going to recover, I thought the world was beginning to go well with us again. It is strange that Mrs. Hilder says nothing about the operation, but surely no news is good news. If things had gone badly her heart would be so broken that she could not have written of anything else."

Mrs. Vision nodded absently. Though she said nothing to damp Hilary's expectancy, she feared the more because of this silence. She had something of Mrs. Hilder's spirit, and knew the instinct which bids the heart hide its agony and show to the world an unruffled front.

"Frances is sleeping now, so, if you like, you may go up to her room," she said. "When she wakes I expect she will know us all."

Hilary's eyes shone. "God is very good," she said softly. "I must go and tell Aunt Sophie. She will be so glad, poor dear. It has been such a trial to her not to be able to nurse Francie, but there will be much she can do now."

She went off to the dining-room, where Mrs. Pederson was nodding drowsily over a newspaper. Hilary's news banished all sleepiness in a moment, and the paper dropped from her trembling fingers. She tried to speak, but words failed, and tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks.

"I never knew how I loved that child till she seemed slipping away from me," she said, wiping her eyes. "Never love too little, Hilary;

nothing hurts more when you think it's too late to make up for your coolness. I've thought a lot since I've had so much time on my hands. I've thought of Frances, baby, child and woman, till I can't for the life of me see why we never got on together. If she had been more like you, Hilary, perhaps we should have cared for one another more. She was always too clever for me, and little good her cleverness has done her, after all. It's going to be different altogether—that is, if Frances does not keep up old grievances, and I don't think she will. A girl cannot go down to the gates of death, surely, and be no better. Anyhow, I am going to nurse her now. There is nothing I can't do for a convalescent as well as Mrs. Vision, though Dr. Maydew says she has a genius for nursing."

It was only to be expected that Frances' recovery should be slow and gradual. She seemed to lack all that desire for life which is one of the greatest aids to restoration. She lay day after day, languid and speechless, staring out of the window, thinking, dreaming, yet never speaking of the disappointment and failure which filled her mind and brought the furrow of pain into her white forehead. She submitted

to be petted with the listless languor of a spoiled child in the early stages of convalescence, and received the attentions of her nurses with a sullen apathy quite foreign to her. Self-absorbed Frances might be, but she had never been ungrateful.

On the day fixed for the return of the Hilders to Fairmead, she was well enough to be carried to a sofa near the fire in Mrs. Pederson's sitting-room. Hilary sat at the window, listening for the barking of the dogs which would announce the arrival of the travellers.

Frances watched her indolently.

"You will begin work again now?" she said. "I shall miss you, for convalescence is a thousand times duller than illness. How many days will your master allow you before you go into harness again?"

Hilary frowned. "Don't, Francie," she said, in a strangled voice. "Do you forget that if he wants me at all, it will be because the operation has failed? I'm waiting to know. I wish I were not so horribly afraid for him. Mrs. Vision will harbour no doubts; she thinks Mrs. Hilder would have told her if it had failed, but the letters have said nothing about it."

"'No news, good news,' says the proverb," Frances replied lazily. "If you are so anxious, why don't you go down to Fairmead and see for yourself? It's worrying to see you sit there, looking like Patience on a monument, concealing a preying anxiety."

Hilary coloured and bit her lip. Not so long ago she would have needed no telling; she would have snatched up her hat and have been at the gate to meet the travellers. To-day, some odd shyness, to which she could not give a name, held her back.

CHAPTER XX.

THE VALLEY OF SHADOWS.

HILARY was going up to her room that night when Mrs. Vision entered the hall from the garden, a shawl thrown over her fair hair.

"Yes, I have been up to Fairmead," she said, answering the question in Hilary's eyes. There was a note of sadness in her vibrant voice, and her face wore a grave expression. "I did not see Max; he had gone out to smoke a cigar. It was all of no use, Hilary. Mrs. Hilder says that Pagenstecher gave only the faintest hope, and even that was elusive. Poor Max may have to walk in darkness all the days of his life."

The girl's face paled, and she clung to the rail of the banister. She did not know till then how much she had actually hoped for Mr. Hilder's recovery, and how truly she suffered for him.

"How can he bear it?" she said, through her clenched teeth.

Mrs. Vision lifted her head with that pride

she never failed to feel in any form of human courage and heroism.

"Mrs. Hilder says he bears it wonderfully. She has never heard one word of complaint. He accepts his cross without a shadow of repining. He is even full of the *élan* of youth and life. He regrets his loss on his mother's account, while she, poor thing, says that even in the midst of the sorrow, she feels there are compensations. He will never leave her now. Once his work took him away often; he travelled greatly. He will travel no more without her, and she cannot help feeling that his presence compensates her a little, though she blames herself for the feeling."

"Nothing can compensate *him*," Hilary said sadly. Yet as she went up to her room, one thought came again and again to her mind; she had her compensation. He would need her still. Her work at Meadham was not done, and she would not be called to leave it.

She pulled up the blind and looked out into the night. The full moon stood over the fir wood, painting the autumn landscape with its silvery beams. It brightened copse and river bank and the riband of pathway which led from the Cottage to Fairmead. The trees had

lost their wealth of foliage, and Hilary could see the dark mass of the old house and its stacks of chimneys ink-black in the moonlit landscape. Half gazing at the beautiful scene, half dreaming of what Mrs. Vision had told her, Hilary became suddenly aware of a figure, moving hesitatingly and uncertainly in the shadow of the wood. Near the Cottage garden it stopped and turned, stretching the arms out with the gesture of one in dire distress. Hilary stood riveted to the spot, straining her eyes to discover who it might be wandering along the private path so near to the Cottage. As she watched, the figure emerged into the moonlight, and she recognised Max Hilder.

For a moment she stood motionless. Then she pulled down the blind and moved quickly from the window. There was that in his gait and bearing that told her he was weary and heart-sick, and, for the moment, had thrown off the armour he wore before others. Even she who understood and pitied him from the bottom of her warm, generous young heart, would not look upon his struggle.

Yes, the full moon which brightened copse and field could not brighten the future, which stretched dark and empty before the master of

Fairmead. Though he might show an unruffled front to the world, he had his dark hours, and one was upon him now.

He knew that everyone wondered at his courage and praised his gallant bearing; the recollection brought a bitter smile to his face. If they but knew how desperately hard it was at times to let ambition, youthful daring, and hopes of love go by, and to piece together the broken potsherds of life which were all that were left to him!

He stumbled along the river path till he reached Mrs. Vision's boundary, and leaned on the rustic fence. He had expected to find Hilary at the house when he returned, and Mrs. Vision's explanation of Frances Kemsing's illness and the necessity of the girl's attendance upon her, scarcely satisfied him. He knew that the thought of Hilary had been with him constantly since he had settled for ever in the valley of shadows, and he congratulated himself that for once his folly had been wisdom. He rejoiced that he had had one glimpse of that radiant girlish face, since the sight must last him a lifetime.

He was thinking of Hilary as he paced to and fro slowly. She had counted for much both

with his mother and himself since she danced into their life so prosaically, in answer to an advertisement. He recalled her clear, gay voice, her little bursts of laughter, her frank, direct views upon one and every subject which came under discussion, her sudden enthusiasms and her innocently severe judgments.

And what a worker she was! Surely a man never had a more energetic and whole-hearted secretary, given even to works of supererogation, as though her hours were not long and tedious enough.

There was no question now of her leaving Meadham; he could do without her less than ever. Yet as this thought flashed across his mind he recalled something Mrs. Vision had said. The old aunt was getting restless, and had announced her intention of returning to town as soon as Hilary's engagement was fulfilled. Perhaps arrangements had already been made and Hilary's failure to meet her friends arose from a dislike to tell them that they must part.

He threw his cigar into the grass, where it glowed a moment like a tiny spark of fire. That possibility opened a chamber in the young man's heart, the existence of which he had only

vaguely suspected. He was startled, displeased, aghast at the sorrow he was preparing for himself.

What was this wild dream he was cherishing? Like a chill wind, stern reality smote him in the face, and he turned away, whispering that he must cure himself of this folly.

There was much left, even to a man blind and helpless, but he must not ask for brightness and youth to link themselves with his darkness. He could dream of woman's love, but he might never ask for it.

Next day Hilary went up to Fairmead. She was shown at once to the library, where mother and son were sitting together. Something in the aspect of the room and the attitudes of the two struck a chill to the girl's heart. She told herself, afterwards, that it was the atmosphere of accepted trouble, the sitting down, as it were, to bear it, that hurt her. It was always Hilary's way to fight a trouble, to say to climbing sorrow, "Thy element's below," and she had expected Max to share her feeling. She did not think that she admired him in the attitude of resignation.

She looked round the room quickly. Mrs. Hilder sat in a high-backed chair in the

window, her white hands lying idle in her silken lap; Max stood propping his broad back against the mantelshelf. The table was swept clear of the litter of papers it always bore, and books were stacked neatly on the shelves. Surely this did not mean that work was to be put aside from to-day, and that the epoch-making book was never to be finished! Mrs. Vision's account of Max's mood had not suggested this, and Hilary resolved with girlish confidence that it should not last if she could help it.

Mrs. Hilder smiled faintly as the girl crossed the room and uttered her name in a tone of affectionate welcome.

"You see, we are home again, my dear," she said gently. "I suppose Agnes has told you that our journey was fruitless. Even hope is no longer left us. But Max refuses to be crushed; he is brave as ever."

Hilary looked from mother to son with dim eyes. In the presence of trouble she always forgot self and circumstance, in an overwhelming desire to help and comfort. "I am so sorry, so unspeakably sorry!" she cried.

Max Hilder felt, though he could not see,

the pitying gaze she turned upon him, and he smiled.

"It is no use denying that this has been the going down of a great hope, Miss Hilary. Pagenstecher's verdict leaves the future pretty blank."

Hilary shook her head. "The future may still be just as full and bright as you care to make it, Mr. Hilder," she cried eagerly. "You have not got your breath yet, you know; things will look quite different by-and-bye. There was Homer, and Milton, you know," she went on with cheerful irrelevance. "They did lots of work under just the same disadvantages. And you have me. I am not humble enough to think myself a nonentity. Surely you are not going to tell me that my eyes are not good enough to be supplementary to yours, and that even with my help you cannot finish the book. I will do all I possibly can, if you will let me."

Hilder's lips twitched as he listened to this impetuous, warm-hearted speech. He was glad from the bottom of his heart that he had seen Hilary once, though for such a brief space of time. He knew just how she was looking at him now, the grey eyes shining,

the mobile face upturned, and the sweet lips apart.

He was silent for a moment, and then he laughed—the pleasantest laugh his mother had heard since they had left Germany.

"It were a shame to despond with such a comrade," he said lightly. "I accept your help, Miss Hilary, though I dare not hope that, even backed up by you, I shall make a trio with Homer and Milton."

He went to the table and swept a pile of manuscript from a drawer. "Why shouldn't we set things in order at once for a start?" he said. "I have wasted enough time already, and I am sick of idleness. There ought to be some notes which a fellow-student took for me when we were in Wiesbaden, among this batch of papers. Look them out, and we will fit them into their place in the manuscript."

Hilary threw off her hat and set to work, whilst her employer roughly sketched a new development of the book he had decided upon.

Mrs. Hilder watched them with a happy light in her dark eyes. She had no fears for Max now. He would take up his work again, and she would not have to sit by and watch the epicurean patience which had tried her

sorely once before. She blessed Hilary in her heart, and felt that it was a happy day for Fairmead and its master when she came across its threshold.

She had come among them without flourish of trumpets. She had just slipped into her place and set herself to do the work required of her, as though it were what she had been born to do. But once she was settled there, it seemed as though they had got something they had wanted all their lives. Mrs. Hilder knew that if Hilary left Meadham, she would miss her as she would miss the swallows which came to make their nests under the eaves every year, or the primroses which bloomed in the south border every March, or any other sweet familiar thing.

But what of Max? Was he, too, beginning to turn to the girl in the way which meant that he would miss her irreparably if she went out of his life? Mrs. Hilder wondered sometimes, and scarcely knew whether she hoped or feared most.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE FURROWS.

WINTER came early that year, and passed quietly for the party at the Cottage. Frances still lingered in a state of semi-invalidism, and neither mentioned her work nor said anything about returning to the hospital. Ambition and energy seemed to lie dormant, and when Hilary ventured to speak of them, Frances would merely shrug her shoulders.

"Am not I providing the mater with occupation, which by your own showing, my good girl, she needed greatly?" she would say. "While she has me to fuss over she won't want to leave Meadham, which I suppose is the last thing you desire."

Mrs. Pederson was indeed happier than she had been for months, and seemed to have forgotten her restless desire to get back to town. Mrs. Vision had gone on another long visit to her friends, and the care of the convalescent devolved upon Mrs. Pederson. She was immensely busy, concocting little messes upon an

oil-stove, with which she provided herself when Margaret absolutely forbade her the kitchen, and fussing round Frances in a way which would have driven the girl frantic, if she had cared about anything enough to be worried by it.

For Hilary the days passed heavily, and that brightness and buoyancy of spirit which Paul Kemsing had once said was her richest endowment, were only kept by a determined effort. She was oppressed by an intangible trouble to which she could not give a name and of which she could never have spoken to anyone. A trouble she could not share always weighed most heavily on Hilary; it was her nature to be frank and outspoken, and she chafed under any sense of separation between herself and those she lived with, were it only one of thought and feeling.

Though she had taken up the thread of life without any outward difference when the Hilders returned from Wiesbaden, there was a very real change in it. Max had been right when he said she would never again see the same Max Hilder. Without in the least understanding how it had come about, Hilary felt that a barrier had risen between her and her employer, and

she could no longer ask him frankly, as she once would have done, in what she had offended. She was no longer "little comrade," and her heart grew sore as the relations between them became more and more formal. She did her work patiently and without stint of labour, but she missed the old enthusiasm of mutual interest, which had once given zest to the weariest task.

It was not possible for Max Hilder to feel as he did towards the girl, and for the knowledge to have no effect upon his bearing towards her. Awake to his weakness and the necessity for conquering it, he placed the sternest guard upon himself. It never for a moment occurred to him that Hilary might suffer from a change of front she could scarcely, without vanity, ascribe to its right source.

Mrs. Hilder looked on, wondering whether the policy of letting Providence manage such affairs without human intervention might not be carried too far. She could see that Hilary was not altogether happy, though her smile was as frequent and her bearing as blithe as ever.

She proposed, as the spring advanced, that the girl should learn to drive the little dogcart

used by herself and Max, and that every day she should take them into the country.

"A new duty for secretaries," laughed Max. "Mind, I shall talk German folklore all the time, Miss Hilary. This mother of mine seems to have no idea of the importance of time to a literary man."

"You may talk of what you like; the convenience of driving is that at any moment I can become so absorbed in my task as to be excusably inattentive," laughed Hilary, to whom the prospect of this new diversion was pleasantly exciting. She could not help hoping that the intimacy of driving together might bring back some of the *camaraderie* which had once made her position at Fairmead so delightful.

"I never knew what real dependence and working for one's living meant until this winter," she said to herself. "I used to think Dante stupid when he said that the savour of other people's bread was salt, but it can be bitter as Marah water. Work, like everything in the world, is horrid if it is not sweetened by some gleam of liking, not to say love, on the part of those you work for."

She did not doubt that Mr. Hilder had some "gleam of liking" for her as the spring months

slipped away, and some of the old freedom of intercourse was recovered. They were soon even on quarrelling terms, falling out about a great many things in a light-hearted way—which is always a sign of a good understanding. Max told himself that he had learnt his lesson and might hold himself in check less sternly. He knew that while life lasted he should love the girl who brightened his dark life with the radiance of her strong and vivid personality, but he would keep his secret. He hugged to himself the thought that he had never betrayed it, and imagined that even his mother did not guess how he suffered in private and ached with nostalgia for his lost sense. The young so seldom guess the keenness of sight love gives the old, and that to have suffered and loved and lost in the past is a key which opens the hidden chambers in the hearts of others.

Mrs. Hilder knew well that Max loved Hilary, and she watched the girl, with yearning to see some signs of affection on her part. She did not share in the least her son's belief that his affliction shut him off forever from winning love or asking for it. Being a woman, she knew that to some it would be an added

claim, and believed that Hilary would only love the more because the man she loved needed her sorely. There are some women who care so much to give, that what they gain sinks into the background. Their love has most of the divine in it, and it makes the world a good place for the weak. We wonder sometimes to see a sweet, strong woman expending the wealth of a noble heart upon one we deem utterly unworthy of her. Yet why should we wonder? Is not such love strengthening, upholding, giving itself for the betterment of the weak, a far-off copy of the divine love, and a fair reading of the old truth, "it is more blessed to give than to receive"?

Mrs. Hilder knew that Hilary, in the dawn of her womanhood, was one of these, and she prayed with her whole heart and soul that she might be to Max "as sunshine in a shady place," and that to him should be given the desire of his heart.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE AWAKENING OF FRANCES.

THERE is a limit even to the deepest sense of disappointment and failure. So long as the sun shines and the earth awakes each year to newness, hope and eagerness to take one's place in the battle of life must stir the hearts of the young.

Such an awakening came to Frances. She opened her eyes one morning to see the April sun streaming across her bed and to hear the birds twittering under the eaves, and knew that the hateful apathy which had succeeded her illness had slipped from her. She saw herself, as it were, from outside, and felt that she was playing a pitiful and cowardly part. To accept failure and to sit down calmly under it was a part she would have despised in anyone else, and she would no longer deal softly with herself.

"I am strong again, strong enough for anything," she said, springing out of bed and stretching her thin little arms. "It is six

months since I came down here. Six months! I have dared to waste six precious months!"

She ran across the room and knelt down by the box which held the books Mona Smith had sent to her. Mona had been so sure that she would ask for them in the first days of convalescence. She had neither asked for nor desired to see them till this morning. She turned them over with eager fingers—the dear old Anatomy, the worn notebooks, the digests of lectures; the mere touch of the pages sent a thrill through the girl.

"What a fool I have been!" she said. "I thought I had ceased to care. I told Hilary that one failure had blotted out the past. Nothing can efface the past; it must and does live on into the present, and it is just for us to decide whether it lives as a curse or a blessing. I made a stupid, hideous mistake, and the sting lies in the fact that mere stupidity kept me from finding it out. I had plenty of warnings, but I thought myself wiser. It is bitter to imagine that you outshine others in brilliance, and discover you are ridiculously dense. As a matter of fact, I was the only egregious failure the Hospital sent up last half-year."

She sat on the floor, staring at the sunbeam, with her hands clasped round her knees. She had had so much time for thinking during the past few weeks; it seemed to her as though she had done nothing but think in a circle, and her thoughts had resulted in nothing. Now she saw them all at once crystallised into a plan for the future.

The past had been a pitiful mistake; she had tried to fashion a life which should touch no other, and which should recognise no call so important as that of her own intellect and her own success. The secret of her failure lay there, just as the secret of Ursula's success lay in taking an opposite course. Frances had resolved to be a law unto herself, and she had recognised no other, moral or divine. She had leaned only on her own feeble strength, and it had failed her.

"Let me never lose my hold on Thee again, Great Power above us all," she said aloud. "Let me trust Thy strength, and I shall not fail. I've got the ability; where I failed was in thinking that it was everything; that there was no Power above everything, moving and directing affairs."

She would, she told herself, turn her back

on that pitiful past, and trust the future to make up for its poverty. The future must contain good, if she willed it so, and a few duties she had hitherto neglected stared her in the face as a beginning.

She was still dreaming and planning, when Hilary opened the door and came in.

"My dear Frances, are you mad?" she cried. "You will catch an awful cold sitting there in that thin dressing-gown. Get into bed at once and let me fetch you some breakfast. Aunt Sophie will never forgive me if I have to report a relapse."

Frances sprang to her feet with a laugh.

"I'm not mad, I have come to my senses at last, Hilary," she said, facing her cousin with a light in her dark eyes Hilary had never seen there before. "I have done with invalidism. I'm coming down to the parlour, and I shall eat a huge breakfast. I am going to work again as soon as ever I can arrange things. I shall go back to town and work in earnest for the next exam. I never felt so fit in my life."

Hilary sat down on the bed, and regarded her cousin with some apprehension.

"Of course, I knew the reaction would come," she said. "You were not such a coward

as to let one failure spoil all your life. But you won't overdo it again, will you?"

Frances' lips twitched, and she did not answer for a moment.

"Do you think, dear, I have not learned anything from my disappointment and from being with you?" she said, in a softer tone than was usual with her. "You know what old Carlyle says, 'Experience is a good schoolmaster.' I shall try again, and I hope I shall pass. I want to get qualified more than I ever did; I have got glimpses of work I can do afterwards which I had not before. I knew all that Ursula said about our opportunities was true, but I have only *felt* it lately. Till you feel a thing, it is never really true to you."

"You mean you will go into the slums with Ursula?" Hilary cried eagerly.

Frances shook her head. "I don't know yet; I can't tell whether other things may not clash. I shall not decide yet."

"I wonder what Aunt Sophie will say when she hears you are going back to town," Hilary said. "All her occupation will be gone."

Frances laughed softly. "I'm going to take her with me, Hilary. 'Open your eyes and die of surprise,' as the Irish song says. I have got

used to her dear old fussing ways, and they won't interfere with my work now. You know Ursula is qualified, and gone to her sister who lives in Cross Street. I should be alone in my diggings, and, you know, I have never had to attend to my creature comforts, so I shouldn't take to it readily. I should go without my meals out of sheer disinclination to prepare them. Mother will be perfectly happy ruling over the kingdom of my three rooms."

Hilary nodded with a pleased smile. It did not occur to her to regret for a moment the little income Frances was blithely and all unconsciously planning to take from her. She was only too glad that a right and happy relationship between mother and daughter should be established. She knew that Frances' influence over her mother was strong, and that, with her, Mrs. Pederson would be quite safe from the temptations of Chivers Smith.

It was Mrs. Pederson who first thought what the parting meant for her niece. She had hailed with delight the idea of going back to town with Frances, but she was very unwilling to leave Hilary behind. She only consented when, to Hilary's firm refusal to leave Meadham so long as Mr. Hilder needed her,

Mrs. Vision added her assurance that the girl should be to her as a daughter. The Cottage must be Hilary's home as long as she remained in the country.

One April day found Frances back in London. She had settled, with her mother, not in the old lodgings, but on a large, comfortable top-floor in an old-fashioned house in John Street. The rooms had been to let unfurnished, and Mrs. Pederson found unending pleasure in haunting second-hand shops in search of bargains and speeding from one spring sale to another in pursuit of cheap draperies. It was a return to her old habits which was like the savour of life to her.

At the hospital Frances had been welcomed by her old friends with open arms. They crowded round her at her first appearance, asking her plans, telling her all that had happened in her absence, and looking at her with eyes full of curiosity. Was she indeed the Frances upon whom they had built such high hopes six months ago, and to whom they had looked to bring glory to the Hospital, and who had failed them so incomprehensibly? Yes, she was still the brilliant, passionate worker, who had had such scanty

patience with half-hearted students, and openly scoffed at those who gave thought to other pursuits. There was no doubting her eagerness to take up her work again and her determination to pass her finals with honour, but there was a difference. Without knowing how or why, each felt that, during her absence, Frances had gained something she had hitherto lacked. She would never again scoff at the student who loved friends and pretty clothes, or sneer at the dullard. They had always been proud of her, now they began to love her also.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE HOUR OF PERIL.

ONE afternoon in early June, Bradbrook was cycling into Meadham, for he generally made Mead Cottage the goal of his country rides. It was some time since he had last visited it, and he was unaware of the changes that had taken place and that Mrs. Pederson was in London with Frances.

Not that this fact would have disturbed him greatly. He would have told himself that her value in his eyes depended mainly on her relationship to Miss Hilary, and that for Hilary's sake he would have travelled farther and endured unlimited fatigue.

At a turn in the road he branched off to the left and shot down a steep incline known among Meadham people as the "gulley," a rough track, barely wide enough for a waggon to pass along it, with sheer, bare banks on either side. It was a strange, wild spot, seldom used except by foot passengers, and had been made many years ago for some

purpose no one in the district could now remember.

Bradbrook had discovered it on one of his cycling expeditions, and used it as a short by-way to the Cottage. It cut off a long stretch of the high road, besides affording an opportunity for that careful riding which is meat and drink to the enthusiastic cyclist.

He had been riding some hours, and the day was hot. He decided, therefore, to dismount near the head of the gulley, wheel his machine into a field, and take a rest before presenting himself at the Cottage. He must have fallen asleep, for a sound close behind him, a stentorian shout and the grinding and growling of some heavy body moving, roused him with a start.

"A confounded traction engine," he said. "There ought to be a law compelling them to move in the small hours. They are dangerous to the common weal, and especially to the cycle-wheel if you happen to be caught in a trap like this. I'll stay where I am till the monster has passed."

He was establishing himself for another nap when there rose such a babel of shouts, mingled with the snortings of the agricultural

monster, as made him spring to his feet and run to a gap in the hedge which commanded a view down the gulley. He stood for a moment grasping the rail of the fence, his heart beating wildly with horror and alarm.

It was a terrible sight, and there seemed no hope of its ending in anything but a tragedy. The engine had passed down the hill below the point upon which he stood. Down, down it went, slowly, relentlessly, like some awful, unwieldy force no human power could stay. It had either got beyond the management of the men upon it, or, like Bradbrook, they were so overcome with fright that action was impossible. Below was a little dogcart which had been crawling up the gulley, unconscious of the danger ahead until a sharp turn brought its occupants face to face, at close quarters, with the engine.

At the moment Bradbrook reached the scene, the owners of the cart had become aware of their danger, and the mare had discovered what lay ahead of her. A horse of iron nerve would have been difficult to manage at such a crisis; the graceful creature below was high-bred and nervous. Bradbrook watched with breathless anxiety to see what would happen.

The dogcart had two occupants, a tall, broad-shouldered man who sat with folded arms and appeared to be taking merely a spectacular interest in the events which clearly endangered his life, and a tall, slender girl who was trying with all her might to coax the frightened animal to back down the gulley.

All in vain! The horse was beyond the influence of coaxing voice or firm hand. It plunged wildly to right and left, struggled to get a foothold in the right bank which happened at this point to be more shallow and sloping. Bradbrook saw the light cart tilt perilously on the bank, then the mare turned wildly and tore down the incline, leaving the man and the girl on the roadside.

At that moment Bradbrook uttered a shout, and, springing over the fence, rushed to the scene of disaster.

"Stop that thing you must," he shouted to the men as he passed the engine. "You have done damage enough already with your infernal engine. Don't risk taking more life. Reverse the thing, run it into the bank, do something for Heaven's sake, it you would not be hung for murder."

The moment the mare plunged, he had

seen the girl's white upturned face. It was Hilary, and the man who sat at her side must be the master of Fairmead, going to his death, poor fellow, blind as to how the blow fell.

Mr. Hilder escaped as by a miracle, falling against the sloping bank without ever losing his footing. When Bradbrook came up he was moving here and there with a face more white and set in misery than Bradbrook had ever seen a human face.

"Hilary! . . . Hilary! . . . Little comrade!" he was crying, "Good Heavens! to think I cannot find her, and that she may be dead!" There was something in this futile searching, this agonised protest against his disability, which touched the kind-hearted insurance agent to the quick. In the flash of a moment he knew that Hilder loved the girl he was seeking, and that they two were rivals. Yet no one could have been jealous who saw that futile energy, that pathetic groping, or heard that heart-broken cry. He made all the haste possible to the spot and touched Hilder on the arm.

"This a bad business, but I'm here to help you. You don't know me: I'm a friend of

Miss Pederson's. Don't you worry—she isn't dead. She's lying just where the turn of the cart threw her; but she had a soft bed. The clay is pretty thick, and there happened to be a ledge with grass over it handy. I've a bit or experience in dealing with fainting folks, for I'm an ambulance man. She will come round in a few minutes when I've given her a few drops out of my flask. I always carry a flask; you never know what may happen. Not that one often gets jobs like this."

He talked fast and cheerfully as he knelt beside the ledge on which the girl lay, treating her with that skill and deftness she had admired on a former occasion. He guided the blind man to the spot, and with a delicacy no one would have expected in him, allowed him to hold the girl's unconscious form supported against his knee.

Bradbrook felt sure no bones were broken; both occupants of the dogcart had had a miraculous escape. Hilary had been badly shaken by the fall, and the horror of the danger had caused her to faint; but, so far as Bradbrook could discover, she was not otherwise hurt.

He watched her closely for a few minutes,

and then looked at his companion with a gratified smile.

"She will do now. Can't you hear her sigh? In a minute she will open her eyes and wonder where she is. There, she is getting a little colour. She will be herself directly. If you do not mind being left a moment, I will go up and ask those rascally engine-men where we can get a trap to carry her home. I have a bicycle in the field, too, which I don't want to leave to the mercies of vagabonds."

He ran up the gulley, and Max Hilder was left alone with the unconscious Hilary. Never before or since did he long for his lost eyesight as he did that moment. For knowledge of how this terrible accident had injured her, for information as to how she was bearing it, he had to depend on a stranger, whose very voice warned Hilder that he was a kindly soul, who sympathised with his misfortune, and might be inclined to say what was soothing rather than what was strictly true.

Suppose Hilary were dead? Suppose this stillness meant that the radiant young spirit was gone for ever, and that never again would she brighten his path as he trod the long valley of shadows.

"Hilary, Hilary! come back to me!" he cried, with an exceeding bitter cry, as he drew her closer to him. "Have I killed you, little comrade? It was my wish, not yours, that we should drive on this dangerous path! My love, my love! come back! life will be too hard and dark wanting you."

He scarcely knew that he spoke aloud. In the bitterness of his anxiety, shut out in his darkness, he uttered his thought, all unconscious that it reached the heart of the girl and recalled her to what was passing around her. She opened her eyes, and her breath came with a little gasping sigh.

"Hilary, little love, say that you live," Hilder whispered, feeling her face with gentle, reverent hand.

"Max, Max!" she whispered, the colour flooding her white cheeks. "I am quite safe. I suppose I fainted; but I am in no pain. Tell me, you are not hurt? I thought it so terrible that you should be thrown without being able to see your danger."

"No, I am not hurt; everything is well if you are safe, child. Little comrade, life would have been a sorry place for me if you had gone."

Hilary could not speak; she clung to the arm that supported her, until Bradbrook's footsteps were heard and he came up, pushing his bicycle.

"Ah, Miss Hilary! you are all right again, I see. Lucky escape you've had, I can tell you; but Providence watches over us all, and knew we could not spare one of your sort. I'm going to leave you while I go down to the village and fetch some sort of a trap to take you home. By the way, the driver of that engine of destruction says that if you will step a yard or two down the lane, there is an opening into a field where you might shelter while he gets by. I pointed out to him that to ask the smallest concession of you was distinctly out of place on his part, but he belongs to that order of the human family which considers number one first, and he declares, with the bluntness of his class, that he has wasted enough time already. I have taken his number and his employer's address, in case you wish to take steps, Mr. Hilder, to recover damages. Now, if you please, we will proceed to this convenient slope and see the clouds—of smoke—roll by. You won't mind me leaving you while I fetch the conveyance?"

Hilary and the master of Fairmead did not mind at all. In that moment, when Hilary opened her eyes, a new life had begun for them both. Nothing could ever be the same again now they knew that they loved one another, and that the future held no joy like being together.

When Max told the girl how, on the night of his return from Wiesbaden, he had resolved to conquer his love for her and never to hope to link her youth and brightness with his maimed manhood, she stopped him with a laugh which ended in something like a sob.

"Did you never think I should wonder why you had changed to me?" she said softly. "Ah! and how could you doubt me so? You needed me the more. Surely, you must have known that I should love you better for that reason."

"I did not know it, and I don't see why even now," Max said quietly. "I wonder if you realise all that you are pledging yourself to, child. I'm more than ten years older than you, Hilary, and you have known me scarcely a twelvemonth. I'm a cross-grained fellow at heart even when I manage to show the world

an unruffled front. I'm not patient, and I rebel a hundred times at the affliction which has been given me to bear. I'm a student, too, and times without number I shall seem to care more for my work than for your company. You deserve better, dear, than to be tied to a blind beggar like me."

Hilary looked up at him; she never taught herself that the clear brown eyes could not see the look on her face, and she believed Max knew when she looked at him.

"To me you are just *you*," she said softly. "And if you had not loved me, I think I should have gone wanting you all my days."

When Bradbrook came back, leading a little farmer's cart he had borrowed, he looked at the girl's radiant face and whistled softly.

"You don't look as though you ailed much now, Miss Hilary," he said genially. "A boy is coming up to drive you, so I'll say good-bye. Some day soon I'll be down again. No, thank you, Miss Hilary; I won't go on to the Cottage now. There isn't time, and I want to get back to town."

He watched the two get into the cart and

drive away, then jumped on his bicycle and rode off.

"It was a clear case for congratulations," he said, with an odd roughness in his voice. "But for the life of me I couldn't have worked myself up to the pitch of congratulating. It takes a deuce of a time for a man to cure himself of the dog-in-the-manger spirit. She wasn't for me, so why should I begrudge her to another chap? I wish that she had chanced to fancy a perfect specimen, though. Good Lord! Hilder needs some special bit of good fortune to compensate for his blindness. There must be something out of the common about him, too, for a girl like that to love him in spite of his drawback."

Which shows that a man may hopelessly mistake the working of a girl's heart.

* * * * *

Thus Hilary's dark days came to an end. She had no longer to work "in the furrows," struggling for that blitheness of spirit which was once so easy to capture. She came to Fairmead as its master's wife when autumn dropped into winter, and, through the happy years that followed, still kept "that comely fashion" which had supported her

when she trod difficult paths; which had won for her the love of a man who knew her first through this capacity for "making sunshine in a shady place."

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